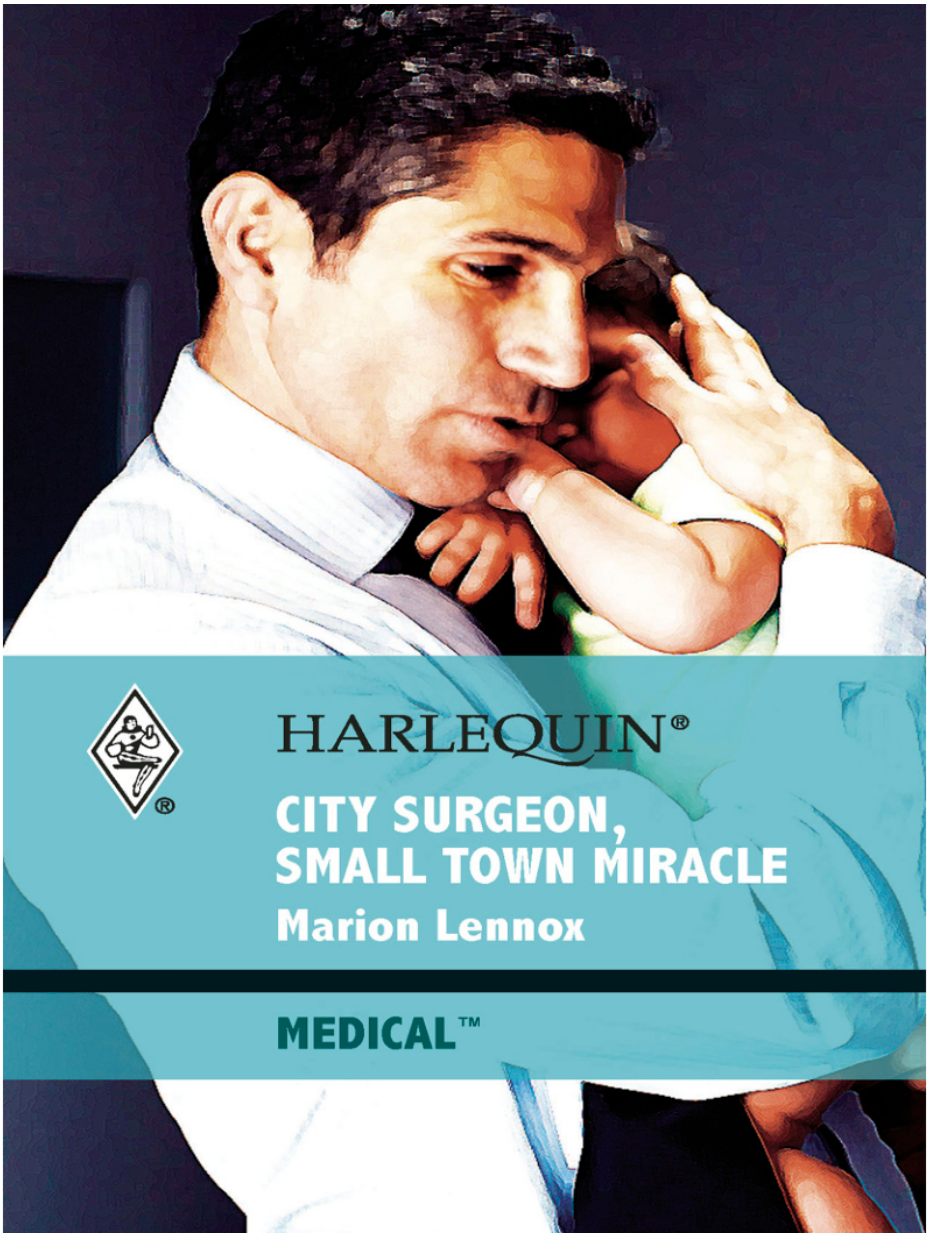

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Marion Lennox

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Before she knew what he intended—before she could even guess he'd thought of such a gesture—he bent and kissed her.

It was a feather kiss, maybe a kiss of reassurance, of warmth and comfort. But surely such a kiss should be to the forehead. Not to the lips.

But to her lips it was.

His mouth brushed hers, and it was as if the heat of the room was suddenly centered right there. It was a surge of warmth so great it was all she could do not to reach out and hold him….

Only, her hands were under the quilt. Thankfully. Because to hold this man…

To hold him would be like shouting out that she needed him, that she was alone and bereft, and he was everything she most wanted but could never have.

"Good night, Maggie," he whispered.

She could have wept as he drew away.

Dear Reader,

Sometimes reality meshes with the stories in my head. This year, a visit to a friend with a passion for ancient tractors was followed by a holiday to Coogee—one of Sydney, Australia's fabulous beaches. While we were there the lights went out. No power! And what was worse, no breakfast coffee. *Aagh!* So while the love of my life tried to read his morning paper in a café so dimly lit I could barely see the table, I was forced to sit over cold cereal and think up a story.

I noticed the couple at the next table as they were fussing over their sleeping baby. They looked to be older first-time parents, and their love for each other and their joyful adoration of their beautiful daughter shone out despite the gloom. That'll do, I thought as I sulked over my orange juice. I named them Max and Maggie, and their lovely baby Rose. But there's always an obstacle to a truly great romance, and suddenly those tractors sprang to mind. Sadly, that's where my story stopped. There's only so much a woman can do without caffeine!

Luckily the power came back on, and with it came coffee. Hooray, I thought as I headed home to start Chapter One. I've fallen in love with Maggie, Max and Rose—and tractors. I hope you do, too.

Happy reading,

Marion

CITY SURGEON, SMALL TOWN MIRACLE

Marion Lennox

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CITY SURGEON, SMALL TOWN MIRACLE

With thanks to the fabulous Anne Gracie, whose friendship means the world to me.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE road was narrow, with a sheer cliff face on one side and a steep fall-away to the sea on the other. The scenery was fantastic, but Dr Max Ashton was in no mood to enjoy the view. He'd had enough of this bucolic setting. He'd had enough of holiday. All he wanted was to get back to Sydney, to work and to solitude.

Which wasn't happening anytime soon. As he nosed his gorgeous, midnight-blue sports coupé around the fourth blind bend since town, a cattle truck veered around from the opposite direction. The small but ancient truck wasn't travelling at speed, and neither was he, but the road was too narrow to let them both pass.

The truck jerked sideways into the cliff-face and the back of the tray swung out to meet him. Collision was inevitable, and collision was what happened.

He wasn't hurt—his car was too well built for that—but it took moments to react to the shock, to see past his inflated airbags to assess the damage.

Mess, he thought grimly, but no smoke. The cab of the truck didn't look badly damaged, and his own car looked bent but not broken. Hopefully this meant nothing but the hassle of a probably uninsured idiot who didn't know enough to keep rust-buckets off the road.

But the accident wasn't over yet. There was a bang, like a minor explosion, and the back of the truck jerked sideways. A tyre had just decided to burst. As he stared out past his airbags, the steel crate on the rear of the truck lurched in sympathy—and didn't stop. It slewed off the truck and crashed sideways down onto the edge of the road.

It was as if a bucket of legs was suddenly upended. A cluster of calves, a soft toffee colour, with huge eyes, white faces and white feet, was tumbling out onto the road. He couldn't count them for

sure. They were too entwined.

The tangle of calves, all legs, tails and wide, scared eyes, was scrambling for collective purchase, failing and pushing itself further toward the edge of the cliff. Before Max could react, the calves disappeared from view, and from the cabin of the truck came a woman's frantic scream.

'No-o-o!'

Shock and the airbags had kept him still for all of thirty seconds, but the scream jolted him out of his stupor. He was out of the car before the scream had ended, heading for the cab.

The truck's passenger side was crumpled into the cliff but the driver's side looked okay. As he reached it, the cab door swung open and a woman staggered out. A blur of black and white flashed past her. A collie?

'Stop them,' she yelled, shoving past him as if he wasn't there. 'Bonnie, go. Fetch them back.'

And the black and white blur was gone.

She was bleeding. All he noticed in that first brief glance was a slight figure in faded jeans, blood streaming down her face, but it was enough.

He grabbed her arm as she headed past, and tugged her towards him. She wrenched back, fighting to be free, but she was small enough that he could stop her. He reeled her in against him, an armful of distressed woman intent on following her calves over the edge of the cliff.

'Let me go,' she yelled. 'They're Gran's calves. Stop them.'

In answer he held her tighter. No matter how bad his weekend had been up to now, no matter that this woman had just made it worse, he was feeling a certain obligation to stop her self-destructing.

'You're hurt.'

She was. There was blood oozing from a cut on the side of her head, and she was staggering, as if one of her legs wasn't doing what it was supposed to.

She was also pregnant. Seven months or so. Apart from the pregnancy she looked like a kid, scruffy, dressed in worn jeans, a blood-spattered windcheater and ancient leather boots. What else? He was doing a lightning assessment as she struggled. Her carrot-red hair was tied roughly into two bright plaits. She had a

cute snub nose, freckles and wide green eyes, currently filled with fear.

She was hurt. There was no way he could let her chase calves.

'Sit,' he said, and tried to propel her to the edge of the road, but she wasn't about to be propelled.

'Gran's calves.' She was practically weeping. 'She has to see them before… Please, let me go!' She made to shove past him again, but he wasn't moving.

'Not until I see how badly you're injured. You've cut your head.'

She swiped blood from her face with her sleeve and glared up at him, and he was astonished at the strength of her glare. 'It's not arterial,' she gasped. 'If I'm bleeding out then I'm not bleeding in so there's nothing to worry about. I'm not about to drop dead from raised intracranial pressure, so let me go.'

Too focussed to note her unexpected knowledge, Max settled for a calm 'No.'

'Yes.' Then before he could react she kicked out. Her boot hit his shin. Hard.

He was so astounded he let her go, and she was over the cliff like the hounds of hell were after her.

Luckily the cliff wasn't sheer. It was a steep incline, sloping sharply twenty feet down to the beach, so the calves—he could count four now they'd disentangled themselves—hadn't fallen. They looked essentially unhurt, and were heading north along the sand, with the collie tearing after them.

The woman was presumably wanting to tear after them as well, and for a fraction of a second he was tempted to let her go.

That wasn't exactly heroic, he thought ruefully. Neither was it possible. She was battered and torn and pregnant, and she was heading off to rescue calves that he'd been in part responsible for releasing. So he groaned and headed down the cliff after her.

He had no trouble catching up to her, but as he reached her she swiped out at him and kept on going. She lurched as she put weight on what presumably was an injured leg. He grabbed her again—and she kicked him again.

Why was he doing this? Her rust-bucket of a truck had caused this mess. She'd kicked him and her boots packed a painful punch. *Women*, he thought bitterly. Since his wife's death he'd

carefully constructed a solid and impervious armour, and once again his desire to retreat behind it came to the fore. Why worry? She could head off after her calves and her dog, and he could ring a tow truck and wait for her to come to her senses.

But she was bleeding, and she was pregnant.

Personal choice didn't come into this. Doctors didn't sign the Hippocratic oath anymore, but conscience was insidious. Besides, he wasn't at all sure she was bright enough to stop before she passed out from shock or blood loss, and an unconscious woman would complicate his life so much he didn't want to think about it.

So he groaned and headed off again, and snagged her just as she hit the beach. This time he grabbed her by the back of her jeans. She swung back to face him, already lashing out, but he was ready for her. He reeled her in by the waist and swung her up into his arms, tugging her so close she couldn't struggle.

'Let me go. I'll bleed on you,' she snapped, and she had a point. He'd bought this jacket in Italy and he liked it. Ruining it for a woman who didn't have a grain of sense to bless herself with seemed a waste. But it was unavoidable.

'Go right ahead, I'll send you the cleaning bill.'

'Blood doesn't come out of leather.'

'No, it comes out of torn skin, which is why you have to shut up, keep still and let me put something on your head to stop the bleeding.'

'I can fix it myself—when I've got the calves. Do you have any idea how I'm going to tell Gran where her cows are?'

'You could say, "Gran, they're on the beach,"' he said mildly, ignoring her struggles and starting to climb the cliff again. 'Okay, they're important but your dog seems to have their measure. They look unhurt. The cliff gets steeper in either direction so my guess is that they'll stay on the beach until you can organise a muster, or whatever you do with cows. Meanwhile my car's in the middle of the road on a blind bend, blocking traffic, and I don't want what's left of it squashed.'

She glared up at him. 'That's a bit inequitable,' she said, and suddenly he saw a hint of humour in her wide eyes. 'What about my truck?'

'I'll save your truck too,' he growled. 'If you'll let me.'

'Thank you,' she said meekly, and abruptly subsided.

He climbed back up to the road, suddenly aware that his own knees weren't too steady. The airbags had kept him safe but shock was setting in. Plus he'd been kicked.

Almost as he thought it he felt an answering tremor in her body. She wasn't as feisty as she was making out, he thought. Or she was hurting more than she'd admit.

Or maybe she was feeling guilty.

'I'm sorry I kicked you,' she said, and to his surprise she put her arms around his neck to hang on. It kept them both steadier as they climbed. It felt okay, too. His knees didn't shake as much when she held him. 'It might have been a little inappropriate,' she conceded. 'Especially since I think the accident was my fault.'

'I'm sure it was your fault.'

'That's not very gracious.' She pushed her hair back from her face—her braids were working loose—then looked at her hand in disgust. She shrugged and put it back round his neck. 'Gross. Look, okay, I overreacted. Yes, I'm bleeding, so maybe you could lend me something to make a bandage. But then I need to go back down to the beach so I can take care of the calves. Maybe you could drive to my farm and ask Gran to send Angus?'

'How far's the farm?'

'Five-minute drive.'

'Angus will rescue you?'

'Angus will rescue the calves.'

'Sorry,' he said, setting her down on the verge. 'I don't know what fairy-tales you've been reading, but in the ones I read heroes don't put calves before fair maidens.'

'I'm not exactly fair,' she retorted. 'I'm red.'

'So I've noticed.' But she was wilting, he thought, and it worried him. 'So let's stop you getting redder.'

Before she could protest he tugged off his bloodstained jacket, grabbed the sleeve of his very classy shirt—bought in Italy at the same time as his jacket—and ripped it from the shoulder. He folded the linen into a pad, placed it over her forehead and applied pressure.

'That was a very nice shirt,' she said, sounding subdued.

'I'll send you a bill.'

'Do heroes say stuff like that?'

‘I believe I just did,’ he said, and grinned, and she managed a smile back. Whoa.

She was older than he’d thought—and she was a lot more attractive. Compellingly attractive, in fact.

Her smile was just plain gorgeous.

‘I can do that,’ she said, and put her hands up, grabbed his shirt-pad and pressed.

As well as being attractive, she was also a lot less stupid than he’d first thought, he conceded. She’d talked about raised intracranial pressure. Did she have medical training?

No matter. She was in no state to practise any medicine right now, and he had no time to concentrate on her smile.

Her head was okay for the moment. But he stood and looked down at her and thought, There’s more here than scratches. She was trying to make light of her injuries, but he recognised pain when he saw it.

She’d been limping. One knee of her jeans was shredded and bloodstained, though not nearly as dramatically as her face. Still…

He bent, carefully took the torn part of the leg of her jeans in both hands and ripped it to the ankle.

Hell.

How had she managed to climb down the cliff? How had she stood up at all?

She’d cut her knee—it was bleeding sluggishly—but that was only part of it. Already it had swollen to almost twice its size. There was a massive haematoma building behind.

‘Yikes,’ she whispered, pushing herself up on her elbows to look. ‘Why did you do that? It was better when I couldn’t see.’

‘Let’s get it elevated,’ he said, and mentally wished his jacket farewell. He folded it then wedged it under her bloodied knee. A spare tyre had spilled from the cattle crate. He put that under her feet, so her legs were raised on an incline as well.

She needed X-rays. Both leg and head, he thought. No matter what she said, he wasn’t about to let her die of an intracranial bleed just because she was stubborn. And there was also the biggie. The baby might have suffered a blow, and even if it was okay the impact could cause problems with the placenta. She needed an ultrasound, and bed-rest and observation.

Her baby needed attention. That meant he needed to hand her over and get away. Fast.

'We need an ambulance,' he told her, tugging his cellphone from his pocket. 'You need X-rays.'

'You can give that up as a joke,' she said wearily. 'Even if there was reception out here—which there isn't—you're looking at Yandilagong's only ambulance right here.'

'Sorry?'

'It's not usually the truck. I have a decent-sized estate wagon, only it blew the radiator hose this morning.'

'What are you talking about?'

'My truck's the local ambulance until I can get a new radiator hose,' she said patiently, as if talking to someone who wasn't very bright. 'And there's not one to be had locally for love or money. I'll get one from Gosland tomorrow—if I can leave Gran for that long.'

'There's no ambulance?' He didn't have time for the extra information she was throwing at him. He needed to ignore what wasn't making sense and concentrate on essentials. 'Why not?'

'You try attracting medical staff or funding for decent equipment to a place as remote as this,' she said bitterly. 'This weekend there'll be a couple of first-aiders with the music festival, but that's all the help I have. If I can't get an ambulance from other areas then I use my own vehicle to take patients to Gosland. That's our nearest hospital, about an hour away. There's basic stuff here, like an X-ray machine, but that's in town, and getting through the crush of the festival isn't going to happen. But it doesn't matter,' she said resolutely. 'I'd like to check my baby's heartbeat but I'm sure I'm fine. I just need to get home to Gran. It's Gran who's the emergency and she doesn't need an ambulance. She needs me.'

Was she some kind of volunteer paramedic? This was sounding crazier and crazier.

He turned away and surreptitiously checked his phone. Sure enough, no reception. Okay, he conceded. No ambulance.

'What's your name?' he asked, trying to figure where to start.

'Maggie. We're wasting time.'

'How pregnant are you?'

'Thirty-two weeks.' And all of a sudden there was a quaver in her voice. 'He's okay.'

‘Can you feel him?’ Even asking that hurt, he thought. Hell, he’d lost his son six years ago. Would he ever get over it?

Luckily she’d only heard his professional question. ‘Yes.’ But there was still the quaver. ‘He’s kicking.’

‘Good.’ Kicking was good. But as Maggie had said, he needed to check the heartbeat. He wanted a stethoscope. Add it to the list, he thought grimly. Ambulance, X-rays, stethoscope, ultrasound, a medical team to take over while he walked away.

It wasn’t going to happen. Meanwhile, there was the small problem of the mess blocking the road.

‘If someone else comes round this bend…’ he said, trying to figure out priorities.

‘It’s not used much,’ she told him. ‘But there’s the odd out-of-towner stupid enough to try and get to the highway this way.’

‘Gee, thanks.’

She winced. ‘Sorry. Yes, that was rude. But we do need to clear the road.’ She stared across at the mess. ‘You’ll need help pulling the crate out of the way. Hang on.’ And she put her hands onto the ground to push herself up.

‘No!’ He was down beside her in an instant, taking a shoulder in each hand and pressing back.

And his preconceptions were changing all over the place. At first he’d thought she was little more than a teenager, like the young mothers he saw clustered outside the prenatal clinics near his consulting suite in the hospital he worked in. They were mostly scared kids, forced by pregnancy into growing up too fast, but the more he saw of this woman the more he acknowledged maturity. There were lines etched around her eyes—smile lines that had taken time to grow. And more. Life lines?

She looked like a woman who’d seen a lot, he thought suddenly.

She wasn’t beautiful—not in the traditional sense—and yet the eyes that met his as he pushed her back down onto the verge were clear and bright and almost luminous. They were eyes to make a man take another look.

And then another.

‘Hey, let me up,’ she ordered, as if sensing the inappropriate direction his thoughts were taking, and he came to with a snap.

‘You want that leg to swell so far I have to lance it to take the

pressure off?'

Her eyes widened. 'What the…?'

'You're bleeding into the back of your knee,' he said. 'If it gets any worse you'll have circulation problems. I want it X-rayed. And like you, I'm worrying about the baby. You need an ultrasound.'

'You're a doctor?' Her voice was incredulous.

'For my pains,'

'Well, how about that?' she whispered, sounding awed. 'A doctor, and a bossy one at that. A surgeon, I'll bet.'

'Sort of, but—'

'They're the worst. Look, if I promise to sign insurance indemnity, can I get up?'

'No.'

'The crate…'

'I'll move the truck.'

'You and whose army?'

'Just shut up for a minute,' he said, irritated, and there was her smile again.

'Yes, *Doctor*.'

The words were submissive but the smile wasn't. It was a cute smile. Cheeky. Pert. Flashing out despite her fear.

'You're a nurse,' he demanded, suspicious.

'No, Doctor,' she said, still submissive, still smiling, though there was no way she could completely disguise the look of pain and fear behind her eyes. 'But you need to let me help.'

'In your dreams,' he growled, disarmed by her smile and struggling to keep a hold on the situation. Worst-case scenario—she could go into labour.

Or she could lose the baby.

Another death…

He needed a medical kit. Usually he carried basic first-aid equipment but his friends' luggage had filled the trunk and the back seat. Fiona and Brenda. No medicine this weekend, they'd said, and they'd meant it.

Women. And here was another, causing trouble.

But, actually, Maggie wasn't causing trouble, he conceded, or no more than she could help. She looked like there was no way she'd complain, but he could see the strain in her eyes.

Okay, he told himself. Move. This woman needs help and there's only me to give it.

'I meant what I said about keeping still,' he told her. 'I have work to do and you'll just get in the way. So stay!'

'Yes, sir,' she said meekly, but he didn't believe the meekness for a minute.

There wasn't a lot of choice. In truth, Maggie's leg hurt so much she was feeling dizzy. She lay back on the grass and tried not to think about the consequences of what had just happened and how it might have affected her baby. That was truly terrifying. She tried not to think how Gran would be needing pain relief, and how she'd been away from home for far too long. She thought about how her leg felt like it might drop off, and that she wouldn't mind if it did.

If this guy really was a doctor he might have something in the back of his fancy car that'd help.

He really was a doctor. He had about him an air of authority and intelligence that she knew instinctively was genuine. He was youngish—mid-thirties, she guessed—but if she had to guess further she'd say he was in a position of power in his profession. He'd be past the hands-on stage with patients—to a point in his profession where seniority meant he could move back from the personal.

She wasn't a bad judge of character. This guy seemed competent—and he was also seriously attractive. Yeah, even in pain she'd noticed that, for what woman wouldn't? He was tall, dark and drop-dead gorgeous. But also he seemed instinctively aloof? Why?

But this was hardly the time for personal assessments of good-looking doctors. The pain in her leg stabbed upward and she switched to thinking what the good-looking doctor might have in the back of his car that might help.

What could she take this far along in pregnancy? Her hands automatically clasped her belly and she flinched. No.

'We need to get through this without drugs,' she whispered to her bump. 'Just hang in there.'

There was an answering flutter from inside, and her tension eased slightly. The seat belt had pulled tight across her stomach

in the crash. There'd been an initial flutter, but she wanted more. This flutter was stronger, and as she took a deep breath the flutter became a kick.

Great! Maybe her baby hadn't noticed the crash or, if he had, he was kicking in indignation.

'We'll be okay,' she whispered for what must be the thousandth time in her pregnancy. 'Me and you and the world.'

And she had a doctor at hand. A gorgeous one.

But gorgeous or not, doctor or not, the guy had no time for medicine right now, and her training had her agreeing with him. Triage told her that unless her breathing was impaired or she was bleeding to death, the road had to be cleared. Someone could speed around the corner at any minute and a minor accident could become appalling.

But how could he move the crate? It was blocking the road in such a way it stopped both the car and the truck from being moved. He couldn't lift it.

He didn't. As she watched, he put his shoulder against it, shoving harder than she'd thought possible.

The crate was about eight feet long by six feet wide, iron webbing built around a floor of heavy iron. It had been on the back of the truck for the last twenty years. She'd had no idea it could come loose.

Gran hadn't told her that. There were lots of things Gran hadn't told her, she thought grimly, a long litany of deception. In fact, Maggie's decision to have this baby had been based partly on Gran's deceit.

But there was no way she could yell at Gran now. In truth, she was so worried about the old lady she felt sick.

What else? She wanted to cry because her leg was throbbing. She desperately needed to check on her baby's heartbeat.

But instead she was lying still as ordered, her leg stuck up in front of her, watching this bossy surgeon shift her crate.

If she had to have an arrogant surgeon bossing her while he organised her life, at least she'd been sent one whose body was almost enough to distract her from the pain she was feeling.

When she'd first seen him he'd looked smoothly handsome, expensive. Now his perfectly groomed, jet-black hair was wet with sweat, dark curls clinging to his forehead. A trace of five-

o'clock shadow accentuated his strongly boned face, and his dark eyes were keen with the intent of strain.

He also looked gorgeous. It was an entirely inappropriate thought, she decided, but it was there, whether she willed it or not. This man was definite eye-candy.

He had all his weight against the crate now. He was grunting with effort, sweat glistening. One of his arms was bare—courtesy of the pad she was holding above her eye—and his arm was a mass of sinews. As was his chest. The more he sweated, the more his shirt became a damp and transparent nothing, exposing serious muscles.

And the more he sweated the more she was distracted from everything she should be focussed on. This was crazy. She was seven months pregnant. She was injured. She had so many worries her head was about to explode, yet here she was transfixed by the sight of a colleague attempting to move a weight far too big for one man.

Only it wasn't. The crate was moving, an inch at a time and then faster, and then he found rhythm. He was right behind it and he kept on pushing, right up to the verge.

The verge was too narrow to hold it.

She should have been thinking forward to what he intended, but she was caught. Watching him. Fascinated.

'Move!' He gave one last gigantic heave—and it slid onto the verge and further. Before she realised what was happening, the crate was toppling over the side of the cliff, crashing its way down to the beach below. Leaving her stunned.

'So how do you suggest I get the calves home now?' she muttered, awed, but he wasn't listening. He was in her truck already, shoving it into gear, reversing it from the cliff face. It sounded like something disastrous was happening inside the engine, but at least it moved. He drove it further along the road, parked it on a widened section of verge, then jogged back for his car.

She was a passive audience, stunned by his body and by his energy. And by…his car! She'd never seen an Aston Martin up close before. Not bad, she conceded, growing more distracted by the moment. Surgeon in open-topped roadster. Cool.

Or…hot.

Or maybe the blow to her head was making her thinking fuzzy. She should be too caught up with the pain in her knee to react like…well, like she was reacting.

But then, as he turned his fabulous car away from her, suddenly her fuzziness disappeared. It was replaced with a stab of panic so great it took her breath away. He'd backed away from the cliff, turning the car to head north.

North. Toward Sydney.

She was staggering to her feet, her hands out, rushing straight forward so he had to slam his brakes on or she would have run right into him. As it was, he stopped with barely an inch to spare.

She put her hand on the bonnet and tried to regroup. Tried to think of some way to say that this was panic, she hadn't really thought he'd leave.

She was being hysterical. Insulting.

But she had no breath to say it. She could only lean on his car and gasp. And then he was out of the car, taking her hands, tugging her toward him. He looked shocked to the core, as well he might be. Crazy woman runs straight into path of car.

She had to explain. 'I—I can't leave Gran,' she stammered. 'You have to take me home. You must. You can't leave me here.'

She could hardly breathe through fright. He swore and held her, and then as she couldn't stop trembling he held her tighter.

'Hey, Maggie, I'm not leaving,' he said, sounding appalled. 'I swear. I'm not that big a rat. I was just turning the car away from the bend so it's safe for you to get in.' And then as she tried desperately to think how to respond and could only think that her leg hurt and she was close to tears and she could have killed her baby, by running into a car of all things, how could she have been so stupid, he swore again, tugged her even tighter into his arms and held her close.

'It's okay,' he whispered into her hair. 'I won't leave you. You're safe. I'll take you back to Gran, whoever Gran is. I'll do whatever we have to do. We'll do it together.'

His chin was resting on her hair.

He'd assumed she'd realise he was just moving the car; that he had no intention of leaving her. But why would she assume

anything? He was a stranger.

Up until now it had been all about him, he thought, savage with himself. Sure, he'd reacted to her injuries, but he'd reacted as if she was a patient in Emergency where he was one of a team; the surgeon doing his job without looking at the whole picture.

But here he had to see the whole picture.

She had no obvious life-threatening wounds, but she was hurt, she was shocked and she was pregnant. Her truck was a write-off, and without a working cellphone she was stranded.

He'd climbed into his fancy car and turned away, probably making it clear by his body language he wanted to be shot of her. Her reaction—that he was about to leave—was so understandable he felt ill.

So he held her close and waited until her racing heartbeat eased, until he felt the rigid terror go out of her. Finally he felt her body soften, mould into his, take comfort from his hold.

It wasn't exactly professional, to hold her like this, but who was worrying? He'd been shocked, too. If it felt good to hold onto this woman, then so be it. He could take comfort as well as give it.

And it felt good.

Different.

He'd hardly touched a woman for six years. He hadn't wanted to. Now slipping into the edges of shock and concern and the need for professional care came something else.

Desire?

Surely not. There was no way he could desire this woman, for she was everything he most wanted to avoid. To feel like this within moments of meeting her was crazy. But there was no escaping the way touching her made him feel. There was no avoiding the way his body was responding.

Her body was soft, yielding against him. Her hair was naturally curly, and her curls were escaping their braids. Her hair was really cute.

Really soft.

Nice.

And then…*pow*!

The thump between them was such a surprise it drove them apart. They stood at arm's length, staring at each other in

astonishment. Then staring down.

'I'm s-so…' she stammered. 'I'm so s-sorry.'

'I don't think it's you who needs to apologise for that one,' he growled. The sensation of her baby had slammed the need for sense into his head and he took a step back. Literally as well as emotionally. What the hell had he been thinking?

Caring for a pregnant woman… No and no and no.

Her wide green eyes stared up at him, and then down at her still heaving bump.

'He's got a good kick,' she ventured, cautiously.

'He surely has.' New emotions were surging in now, and his head was scrambling to reassemble his emotional armour. How long since he'd felt a baby's kick? It made him feel…

No. Don't even think about going there.

'Maybe it's to reassure us he's okay,' he managed, feeling lame, dredging up a smile.

'Maybe,' she said and wobbled a smile in return. And then: 'That was unforgivable,' she said. 'Thinking you were leaving.'

'I hadn't told you otherwise. I'm sorry. But consider me kicked. By…'

'Archibald.'

'Really?' He found himself smiling properly this time, caught by her fierce determination to apologise, and her equal determination to insert humour into the situation. This was one brave woman. The sensations he was feeling toward her were inappropriate but clinical approval was fine. 'You've decided on his name already?'

'He knocked my mug of tea over last week,' she said darkly. 'I had to run cold water over my tummy for ten minutes until I stopped stinging. Until then, *she* was going to be Chloe or *he* was going to be William, but that's in the past. Archibald it is.'

'Named for the baby's father, then?' he said, still striving to sound professional. He smiled again, but it was her turn for her smile to fade.

'His father would be William, but Archibald takes precedence.'

He was still holding her, by both hands, but now she made to pull away, as if naming the baby's father had brought her to her senses. Both of them had to come to their senses. 'Look, I am sorry,' she whispered.

‘And I’m sorry, too,’ he said. ‘So let’s stop apologising and get things moving. I need to take you to hospital.’

‘I’m not going to hospital, but I do need to get back to Gran’s. It’s not far. If I hadn’t hurt my leg, I could walk.’

Yes! Suddenly things seemed simple. This wasn’t his problem. He could take her to her family and explain the need for hospital assessment. She’d said Gran was ill, but where there was a gran surely there’d be other relatives. He could hand her over with instructions to take her to the nearest hospital, and his nightmare of a weekend would be over.

‘The calves won’t go anywhere,’ she said, thinking out loud. ‘With Bonnie’s help Angus can drive them home by foot from here.’

Hooray for Angus, he thought. And William and Gran. A whole family. Better and better.

But she was wilting, and he was wasting time.

‘Okay,’ he said, and ignoring protests he lifted her across to his car, blessing the fact that the Aston Martin had a rear seat. Once again, though, he was surprised at how little she weighed.

Were things okay? Was this a normal pregnancy?

This was Not His Problem, he reminded himself sharply. He needed to cope with the emergency stuff only. She’d have her own obstetrician. Her family could take her there.

Stay professional and stay clinically detached.

But as he lifted her into the car he smelled a faint citrusy perfume, and he was caught once again in a totally unprofessional moment.

Her luminous green eyes were framed by long, dark lashes, surely unusual in a redhead. Her freckles were amazingly cute. Her flame-coloured curls were still doing their best to break out of their braids, and he had an almost irrational desire to help them escape.

Whoa. What was it with him? He was being dumb and irrational and stupid.

This was his patient. Therefore he could stop thinking dumb thoughts about how she smelled and how she felt against him and how her hair would look unbraided.

So turn professional.

‘Let’s do formal introductions,’ he said, trying to sound like he was about to key it into her patient history. ‘Can you tell me

your full name?'

'Maggie Maria Croft. You?'

'Maxwell Harvey Ashton.'

'Dr Ashton?'

'Max is fine, we'll forget the Harvey and I'm hoping we don't need the Doctor. But if necessary…' He hesitated but it had to be said. 'If your family can't take you, I'll drive you to the hospital at Gosland—or even to Sydney if you prefer.'

'Thank you,' she said, courteously but firmly. 'But it won't be necessary. If you can just take me back to the farm I can sort this mess out by myself.'

CHAPTER TWO

So FIVE minutes later he turned into the farm gate—and found himself staring at a graveyard. A tractor graveyard.

The driveway from the road to the house was a long avenue of gumtrees, and underneath their canopies old tractors were lined up like sentinels. There were tractors from every era, looking like they dated from the Dark Ages.

'Wow,' he breathed, and involuntarily slowed to take a better look. Some of the tractors looked like they could be driven right now if he had the right crank and didn't mind using it. Some were a wheel or two short of perfect. Some were simply skeletons, a piece of superstructure, like a body without limbs.

'William likes tractors?' he ventured.

'Gran and Angus like tractors. Gran bought her first one when she was fifteen. I believe she swapped her party dress for it. The tractor didn't work then. It doesn't work now, but she still thinks it was a bargain.

'She sounds a character.'

'You could say that,' she said morosely. 'Or pig stubborn, depending on how you look at it.'

He glanced into the rear-view mirror, and saw a wash of bleakness cross her face—desolation that could have nothing to do with the accident. And her expression caught something deep within him. For a fraction of a second he had an almost irresistible urge to stop the car so he could touch her; comfort her. It took strength to keep his hands on the steering-wheel, to keep on driving.

He did not do personal involvement, he told himself fiercely, confused by his totally inappropriate reaction. This woman was married and pregnant and he hadn't felt this way about a woman since Alice died. Had he hit his head in the crash? Was he out of his mind?

They'd reached the end of the driveway now, and he pulled up beside an old estate wagon with its bonnet up. The car with the

damaged radiator hose. He focussed on that. Something practical and something that didn't make his heart twist.

'So that's your wagon. Is there something else you can use to drive to hospital?'

'What's wrong with tractors?' she demanded, and he caught a glimmer of a rueful smile in the rear-view mirror. Once again, he had that kick of emotional reaction. This lady had courage and humour. And something more.

'I'll be fine,' she told him, seemingly unaware of the effect her smile had on him. 'Thanks for driving me home. I'll give you my licence details, and our insurance companies can take it from here.'

So that was that. He was dismissed. He could retreat back to Sydney. Which was what, until an hour ago, he'd been desperate to do.

It seemed to Max that Yandilagong was about as far from civilisation as it was possible to get without launching himself off the New South Wales coast and swimming for New Zealand. Not for the first time, he wondered what he'd been thinking to let his friends—a cohort of career-oriented medicos—talk him into coming.

'It'll be fun,' they'd told him. 'Music festivals are all the rage and this one has a great line-up.'

Since he'd moved to Australia he'd been asked to many hospital social events, but each time he'd refused. Since Alice's death he'd immersed himself in his work to the exclusion of almost everything else. Now his surgical list was growing to the point where the pressure had become ridiculous. More and more patients were queuing, and his teaching commitments were increasing exponentially.

Last week, working out in the hospital gym in the small hours, trying to get himself so physically tired that sleep would come, he'd realised he was reaching breaking point.

So he'd accepted, but what neither he nor his colleagues had realised was that the festival was a family event. There were mums, dads and kids, young women holding babies, grandmas bossing grandkids, dads teaching kids to dance. His friends, men and women who were truly married to their career paths, were appalled.

‘We’re so lucky not to be stuck with that,’ they’d declared more than once. ‘Hicksville. Familyville. Who’d want it?’

He didn’t, of course he didn’t, so why had it hurt to hear them say it?

Then this afternoon they’d announced they were bored with music and children, so they’d organised a tour of a local winery. He’d spent a couple of hours listening to his friends gravely pontificate about ash and oak and hints of elderberry, and how wonderful it was to be away from the sound of children, and how the advertisers should be sued for not letting ticket buyers know how many children’s events there’d be.

And then his anaesthetist had rung from Sydney. A woman was being flown in from outback New South Wales with complications from a hysterectomy. When was he coming back?

His registrar could cope. He knew he could, but the choice was suddenly obvious. He’d left feeling nothing but relief. For six years he’d been alone and that was the way he liked it.

He wanted to be alone now. But instead he was parked in a tractor graveyard while a seven-months-pregnant woman was struggling to get out of his car.

Wishes aside, he couldn’t leave her. Not before he’d handed her over to someone responsible.

‘Who’s here?’

‘Gran.’

‘But she’s ill.’

‘Yes.’

‘So where’s William?’ he asked, knowing it was a loaded question but hoping there’d be a solid answer.

‘William was my husband,’ she said flatly. ‘He’s dead.’

‘Dead.’ He felt like he’d been punched. Dead. Hence the bleakness. Hell.

‘Not recently. You don’t need to say you’re sorry.’

Recent enough, he thought, looking at her very pregnant tummy. Alice had been dead for six years yet still…

Well, there was a crazy thing to think. Make this all about you, he told himself. Or not.

‘So who’s Angus?’

‘William’s uncle.’

‘How old?’

‘Sixty.’

This was better. ‘He’ll look after you?’

‘He’ll enjoy the challenge of getting the calves up to the house. Bonnie’s his dog. Any minute now he’ll be here to demand what I’ve done with her. So thank you, Dr Ashton. I’ll be right from here.’

He was dismissed.

For the last forty-eight hours all he’d wanted to do was get out of Yandilagong. He still did.

But he needed to see how competent this Angus person was, and how forceful. For all Maggie was struggling to pull herself from the car, she was looking paler and paler.

Placental bleeding? The two words had been playing in his head for half an hour now and they weren’t going away.

He might not have done anything closely related to obstetrics for six years, but the training was there and he knew what a strain a car crash could put on a placenta.

Archibald had kicked him. That was a good sign but he needed more. He wanted to listen to the baby’s heartbeat and then he wanted Maggie in hospital under observation.

And that bleak look on her face was etched into his mind. He couldn’t leave her. And even if he could… Still there was that tug he didn’t understand.

‘You’re not walking,’ he growled, and before she could resist he’d lifted her up into his arms again. He strode up through a garden that smelled of old-fashioned roses, where honeysuckle and jasmine fought for smell space as well, where tiny honeyeaters flitted from bush to bush and where noisy rosella parrots swooped in random raids to the banksias around the edge.

The garden looked neglected and overgrown but beautiful. The farmhouse itself was looking a bit down at the heel, in want of a good coat of paint and a few nails, but big and welcoming and homely.

Once again there was that wrench of something inside him. Like coming home. Which was clearly ridiculous. This was like no home he’d ever known.

He’d reached the top of the veranda steps and as he paused she wriggled out of his hold and was on her feet before he realised

what she was about.

'Thank you,' she said, breathlessly, sounding…scared? 'I can take it from here.'

Scared? Was she feeling what he was feeling?

He didn't know what he was feeling.

'Not unless there's someone through that door to give you a strong cup of tea, then carry you out to a nice, safe nontractor-type car and get you to hospital,' he said, making his voice stern. 'Can you tell me that?' Even though she was standing, he was blocking her way through the door.

'I can't,' she admitted. 'But I don't have a choice. Please, I can't leave Gran.'

'Then I can't leave you.' Neither, he realised bluntly, did he want to.

'Maggie, is that you?' The high, querulous voice came from inside, and without waiting for permission Max pushed it open.

The first thing he saw as he opened the door was a vast open fireplace filled with glowing embers, a burgundy, blue and gold carpet, faded but magnificent, great squashy settees and a mantel with two ornate vases loaded with roses from the garden. And jasmine and honeysuckle. The room was an extension of the garden, and the perfume was fabulous. Then, as his eyes became accustomed to the different light, he saw Gran. She was a tiny wizened woman, bundled in blankets on the settee, looking toward the door with obvious anxiety.

'I'm okay, Gran,' Maggie said urgently from behind him, and made to push past, but she stumbled on her bad leg. He caught her and held her against him, and she didn't fight.

But suddenly Gran was lurching to the hearth to grab the poker. She turned toward him, but then fell back on her pillows, waving the poker, fright and feistiness fighting for supremacy.

'Let her go.' Her voice came out as a terrified rasp and he felt Maggie flinch and struggle again to get free.

The two settees in the living room were opposite each other, forming a corridor to the fire. He ignored the poker—there wasn't a lot of threat when Gran didn't seem to be able to stand—and moved to set Maggie down. Gran's head and the poker were at the fire end. He set Maggie the opposite way, so the poker was away from his head.

'He's helping, Gran. Put the poker down,' Maggie muttered,

and he felt her tension ease a little. She was back in familiar territory now, even if it was did seem crazy territory. A tractor museum, roses, roses and more roses, and a poker-waving Gran.

'What's he doing here?'

'He's Dr Ashton,' Maggie said, flinching as she moved her leg. 'A doctor. Imagine that. Right when we need him.'

There was a lot to ignore in that statement, too. He released her onto the cushions, aware once again of that weird stab of a sensation he didn't understand. Something that had nothing to do with a doctor/patient relationship.

Something that had to be ignored at all costs.

'You do need a doctor, but not me,' he growled, moving instinctively to load more logs from the wood-box to the fire. Thankfully Gran kept her poker hand to herself. 'Maggie, you need hospital.'

'I don't.'

'Your baby needs to be checked.'

'I can't leave Gran. I'll put my stethoscope on my tummy and lie here and listen to him,' she said. 'That's all I can do.

'You have a stethoscope?' he demanded, while the old lady rubbed her poker longingly, like she might still need it.

'Yes.'

'You're a nurse?'

'I'm a doctor.'

'A doctor?'

'They don't all come in white coats,' she said bitterly. 'Or Aston Martins and gorgeous leather jackets.'

'Maggie, tell me what's going on.' Gran was trying again to heave herself to a sitting position, gasping as if breathing hurt, and the fear was still in her voice.

'Dr Ashton crashed into our truck.'

'The calves,' Gran said in horror, but Max was playing triage in his head, and calves were somewhere near the bottom.

Maggie was a doctor. A doctor!

The personal side of him wanted to take that aside and think it through, for all sorts of reasons he didn't fully understand, but the professional side of him had work to do and wasn't giving him time to consider. 'So you're a doctor,' he managed. And you have a stethoscope?'

‘The calves are okay, Gran,’ Maggie said, seeming to ignore him. ‘Bonnie’s looking after them.’ Then she turned back to him. ‘Yes, there’s a whole medical kit in the back of the wagon. Enough to cope with anything from typhoid to snakebite.’ She winced again and lay back on the cushions, her hands instinctively returning to her belly. ‘And, yes, I’d appreciate it if you could get my stethoscope.’

He stared at her and she stared back. Defiance and fear mixed.

‘I’ll take you both to hospital,’ he said.

‘Over my dead body,’ the old lady said from the other settee.

‘Mrs Croft?’

‘I’m Betty,’ she snapped.

‘Betty, then,’ he said, and softened his tone. ‘I’m not sure what’s wrong with you…’

‘I’m dying.’

‘So are we all,’ he said without changing his tone. If she wanted histrionics she wasn’t going to get them from him. ‘Some faster than others. I gather you’re ill and I’m sorry. I also know that your granddaughter—’

‘Maggie’s my granddaughter-in-law.’

‘Your granddaughter-in-law, then,’ he said evenly, glancing back at Maggie and knowing he was right. ‘Maggie’s been in an accident and her baby needs to be checked. If the placenta’s damaged, there could be internal bleeding. The only way she can be checked is to have an ultrasound. If she doesn’t have that ultrasound the baby could die, and she could be in trouble herself. Betty, I’m sorry that you’re ill, but it’s true I’m a doctor and I have to sort priorities. Is it right that we risk Maggie’s baby’s life because you won’t go to hospital?’

‘We’re not risking…’ Maggie said, and he turned back to face her. He had to ignore emotion here and speak the truth.

‘If you really are a doctor, you know that you really are putting your baby at risk.’

She was torn. He could see it—he saw fear behind her eyes and he knew that she was desperately trying to hide it. Why?

‘We don’t have time to mess around,’ he said. ‘I should have insisted at the start.’

‘I can do an ultrasound,’ she said.

‘What, here?’

‘Not on myself.’ Her voice was suddenly pleading. ‘But there’s everything we need in my car. I know, it’s asking a lot, but if you could help… Gran doesn’t want to go to hospital and neither do I. If I must for my baby’s safety then of course I will, but there’s Angus as well and he’ll be so afraid. So, please, Max, can you do an ultrasound on me here and reassure me that things are okay?’

‘Why will Angus be afraid?’

‘Angus is my son and he’s disabled,’ Gran whispered, as Maggie fell silent. ‘He has Asperger’s syndrome. He’s not…he’s not able to cope with people. It’d kill Angus to leave the farm. He’s the reason I made Maggie come here. She’s promised me she’ll stay and she won’t break that promise. She’s a good girl, our Maggie.’

‘My baby comes first,’ Maggie muttered, looking trapped, and once again he caught that look of utter desolation.

‘Yes, but he’ll be okay and you’ll both look after Angus and the farm,’ Gran said. ‘I know you won’t leave. You’ll keep your word. I know you’ll stay here for ever.’

CHAPTER THREE

THIS was crazy. Worse than crazy, it was dangerous. No, she wouldn't leave Gran and the unknown Angus, but maybe his responsibility was to pick both women up and take them to hospital regardless.

But he'd have to chain Gran into the car, he thought ruefully. Plus he didn't know what facilities Gosland hospital had, and the long drive to Sydney was the last thing either of them needed.

But caring for an injured, pregnant woman at home…

And for him personally to have to check her baby…

Max was out on the back veranda, supposedly on his way to fetch Maggie's gear from the back of her wagon. He'd taken a moment to phone Anton, his anaesthetist, to tell him that their more-than-competent registrar would be needed for the woman coming in with the hysterectomy complications. Now he was staring down at the river winding down to the sea, taking a second to catch his breath. And his thoughts.

Maggie would agree to hospital if there was a real threat to her baby. He knew it. The moment he'd laid it on the line—that they were risking the baby's death—he could tell that both women would finally agree to go. Only there was such despair in the old lady's eyes, and such a sense of defeat and fear on Maggie's face, that he'd agreed to help them stay.

So all he had to do now was to find Maggie's ultrasound equipment and turn into an obstetrician again.

No. Checking one baby didn't make an obstetrician.

He wasn't even delivering a baby. He was simply checking it was healthy, before heading back to the city to his very successful gynaecological practice—the surgery he was good at and that he could do without the emotional investment every pregnant woman seemed to demand of him.

The need to care.

Not that he didn't care about his patients. He did. He gave

excellent service, making the lives of the women who came to him much more comfortable. He was even saving lives.

He just didn't do babies anymore.

Except this one.

This was insane. He should refuse to have anything to do with it.

Yet…the way she looked at him…

It was the craziest of reasons and yet he couldn't let it go. She looked as trapped as he felt. More.

He didn't know what was at stake here. He shouldn't want to know, he reminded himself. Do not get personally involved.

Stay professional, he told himself harshly. Find the ultrasound equipment, make sure things are okay and then leave. An ultrasound was no big deal. It wasn't like she was expecting him to deliver the baby.

That was really when he'd run a mile.

'Is he really a doctor?'

'He says he is and he knows all the right words.'

The open fire was wonderful, the room was warm, but Maggie was still shivering. Reaction, she thought. Nothing more. It couldn't be anything like internal shock—caused by a bleed, say, from a torn placenta.

She had to fight the fear. But what was keeping him?

She had a sudden vision of Max in his beautiful car, heading back to Sydney, and she felt ill. But she wasn't running after him this time. She trusted him.

She had no choice.

'Where are my calves?' Gran said fretfully.

'The crate slid off the back of the truck. The calves ended up on the beach. Bonnie's watching over them.'

'Are you sure they're okay?'

'They're fine.' Hopefully they were.

'How do you know? Of all the irresponsible… You only had to bring four calves less than ten miles.' The old lady's voice was querulous and Maggie looked at her sharply.

'How bad's the pain? Scale of one to ten?'

'Three.'

‘Betty…’

‘Eight, then,’ she said, goaded.

‘You have to let me put up a syringe driver.’ With a permanent syringe, morphine could be delivered continuously so there wasn’t this four-hourly cycle of pain, relief, sleep, pain that Betty was suffering. But so far Betty had resisted. She’d insisted on control at every stage of this illness and she wasn’t letting go now.

‘I’ll take a pill in a few minutes.’

‘Take one now. No, take two.’

‘When I see our baby’s okay,’ Betty said roughly. ‘Oh, my dear…’

‘It’ll be fine.’ Maggie hauled herself around and stretched her hand out to her. Betty’s hand was thin and cold and it trembled.

Probably hers did, too, Maggie thought. Things were going from bad to worse.

Hurry up the man with the ultrasound. Max. A doctor for her baby.

And more.

Max.

He’d carried her and he’d made her feel cared for. The remembered sensation was insidious—almost treacherous. It undermined her independence. Stupidly it made her want to cry.

Max.

He opened the back of the wagon, expecting to see a basic medical kit—or even no kit at all, because he still hardly believed she was a doctor—but what he saw was amazing. The equipment, carefully stored, sorted and readily accessible, was state of the art.

What had she said back at the crash site? She was the ambulance?

Maybe she was, for in the centre of the shelves of equipment lay a stretcher. It had been fitted to custom-built rails, with wheeled legs folded underneath. It was narrow, but otherwise there was little difference to the stretcher trolleys used at his city teaching hospital.

The ultrasound equipment was impossible to miss for it was in

a red case labelled ‘Ultrasound’. Useful for a doctor in a crisis, he thought, to be able to say to an onlooker, ‘Fetch me the red case with this label.’ And the cases were stacked and fastened against the sides in such a way that in a crisis they could be pulled out fast.

He had a sudden vision of an emergency—maybe a child with breathing problems. With this set-up Maggie could haul out the side cases fast, then have someone else drive while she worked on the patient until they reached help.

Basic but effective. She was efficient, then, this Dr Maggie.

He needed to be as well. He tugged the ultrasound case, grabbed another case labelled ‘Pain/Anaesthetic’—and then, thinking of the strain on the old lady’s face and the wheeze behind her voice, he grabbed an oxygen canister as well.

Okay. Doctor with equipment.

They dropped their linked hands as he walked back into the room. Up until now he’d seen only an underlying tension, but there was now an obvious tie between the women. Emotional as well as physical?

Was the old lady really dying? He gave himself time to look at her—really look. She was dreadfully gaunt, as though eating had long ceased to be a priority, and her face was taut with pain. And her eyes… He’d seen that look before. Turning inward.

‘Betty needs a shot of morphine,’ Maggie said before he could say anything. ‘Please. Ten milligrams. You’ll find everything in my bag.’

‘The baby…’

‘One injection’s not going to take time. Betty needs it badly.’

‘Diagnosis?’ he said, watching Betty now and talking directly to the elderly woman.

‘Bone metastases,’ Betty whispered. ‘Ovarian cancer ten years back. I knew it’d get me in the end.’

‘Is Maggie your treating doctor?’

‘Now I’m not in hospital, she is,’ Betty said fretfully. ‘But look after her. I’m fine.’

But Max was already flipping open the case, drawing up the injection, aware both women were watching him like two hawks

with a mouse between them. Or two mice with a hawk?'

'You agree to this?' he said, watching Betty's face. Feeling Maggie's tension behind him.

'Yes,' Betty whispered. 'Please.'

He injected the morphine, feeling her pulse as he did so. Faint, irregular. If she was forty he'd be roaring for help, he thought, bullying her into hospital, pulling out all stops to help her, but her body language told him she knew exactly what was happening. He placed pressure on the injection site for a moment and her hand lifted to his and held.

'Thank you,' she whispered, and closed her eyes. 'Now Maggie.'

'Now Maggie,' he agreed, and Maggie nodded and pointed to a power plug behind the couch.

'We can do it here.'

'You don't want to be private?'

'I doubt I'll shock Betty by showing a bit of skin,' Maggie said, smiling wryly. 'And it's warm in here.'

She shivered as she said it. He didn't comment, though—she'd know as well as he did that shock would be causing her to shiver.

And internal bleeding?'

Please not.

'You've used one of these before?' she asked him.

'Not a portable one.'

'Nothing to it,' she said.

And there wasn't. In moments he had it organised, set up on a side table right by Maggie's abdomen.

She was wearing jeans with an elasticised waist and a sloppy windcheater that could easily be pulled up. He rubbed the stethoscope in his hands to take away the chill, then knelt beside her. As she tugged up her windcheater, he glanced up at her and once again saw the flash of fear. He should take her blood pressure first, he thought, and check her pulse, but he had a feeling they'd be high and racing until he gave her the reassurance she needed. Was she shivering from shock or shivering from fear? Probably the latter.

So he placed the stethoscope over her tummy and listened.

And heard.

‘What is it?’ she whispered, and he glanced up and realised his emotions were showing in his face. How many years since he’d done this? And the last baby he’d heard…

‘It’s fantastic,’ he said, but he said it too fast, and saw doubt remain. Try as he may, he couldn’t get his face in order. As an alternative he put an arm around her shoulders, propped her up and handed the stethoscope to her.

She listened, and her face relaxed. As it should. And strangely he found himself relaxing as well, in a way that had nothing to do with the sound of a strong baby’s heartbeat. He was holding her, feeling the tension ease, feeling her body relax into his.

Just like…

No.

‘You looked like there was something wrong,’ Maggie whispered.

‘Nothing’s wrong.’

‘Then why—?’

‘No reason. Let’s move on with this ultrasound,’ he said, more roughly than he’d intended, and she nodded and lay back on her cushions and looked at him directly.

‘Do you need me to tell you how to work this?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘But—’

Okay, truth time. ‘Maggie, I’m not a general surgeon,’ he told her. It went against the grain to admit it but he was up to his ears in this mess already—he may as well commit the whole way. ‘I’m a gynaecologist.’

‘A gynaecologist,’ she said, stunned.

‘Yes. I’m in charge of surgical gynaecology at Sydney South.’ He smiled wryly and glanced across at Betty. ‘If Betty’s ovarian cancer had been diagnosed now rather than ten years back maybe I’d be able to help her. It’s what I’m good at.’

He was searching for gel, laying out what he needed. She was staring at him as if he’d just grown two heads.

‘A surgical gynaecologist,’ she muttered, awed. And then: ‘You don’t get to be a gynaecologist in this country without being an obstetrician as well.’

‘I’m English. But, yes, that’s right. I’ve done the training.’

‘You’re a baby doctor?’ He’d thought Betty had drifted into

sleep as the morphine took effect, but now the old lady's eyes flew open. 'We so need a baby doctor,' she whispered.

'I'm not a baby doctor,' he said, more roughly than he'd intended. 'I work with women with gynaecological problems. Surgical problems.'

But Betty was no longer listening. Instead she was smiling. 'That was the only thing missing,' she said. 'Now we have everything we need. Oh, Maggie…'

'Don't you dare give up,' Maggie said, sounding fearful, and Betty tried a feeble wave but didn't have the strength to pull it off. She closed her eyes.

'You just concentrate on our baby,' she said. 'On William's son.'

'Okay,' Max said, trying not to sound grim as he saw the colour drain from Betty's face. The more he saw what was happening to Betty, the less he liked it, but he needed to focus on Maggie. 'Let's get some gel on you and have a look.'

He rubbed gel on her bulge. Maggie closed her eyes. Yes, she was desperately anxious about the outcome of this ultrasound but she was so tired. If she could just sink into her cushions and sleep for twenty-four hours, that's exactly what she'd do.

There was not a snowball's chance in a bushfire of that happening.

Where was Angus? And how was she going to cope with her patients, with the farm, with Gran, with an injured leg?

She couldn't. She'd hoped she'd have another few weeks to work before the baby was born, but now, with her leg hurting as much as it did, and with Betty dying, and…

And as if on cue the doorbell pealed.

She tried really hard not to groan.

Max was about to place the paddle on her tummy. He paused and looked questioningly at her.

'They'll keep knocking till we answer,' she said, and tried to sit up.

'They?'

'It'll be a patient. The locals know where I live. I need to answer.'

'You're not going anywhere,' he said, sounding appalled she could think such a thing. He placed his hands firmly on her

shoulders and pushed her back on the cushions. Which, she had to admit, felt excellent.

This man was taking charge. Even if it was only for a moment, it'd do, she conceded. There were too many worries to fit in her head. He'd carried her, he'd cared for Gran, he was caring for her.

So soak it in.

She could lie back and imagine that this arrogant, bossy doctor could take all her worries away. He'd check her baby, tell her everything was fine, make sure Betty was pain free, reassure Angus, fix whoever was at the door, fix her world…

Yeah, and pigs might fly. But, meanwhile, he'd said she wasn't going anywhere and he meant it. She let herself relax against her cushions. She didn't quite close her eyes but she almost did. If she shut her eyes the world might disappear.

She wasn't quite ready for that, she conceded. Not yet. Disappearing worlds were for Betty.

But she wouldn't mind if ninety per cent of hers went away.

He was wasting time. The ultrasound was becoming urgent. He had to get to the door, tell whoever it was to wait and get back to his patient. To Maggie.

But when he tugged the door wide he found a deputation. Mother, father, a scrawny little boy clinging to the mother's jeans, and a baby.

'The baby's got a cold,' the man said quickly, as if he was worried the door might be slammed in his face. 'We've all had it, but she's been bad all day and then she went limp. She looks okay now but the missus got scared. So I said we'll stick her in the car and bring her here. Can Doc have a look?'

This was a nightmare. He should tell them to go away.

But Maggie had said she was the ambulance. Was she also the only local doctor?

These people looked terrified. For good reason?

He glanced down and saw the tiny child was swaddled in so much wool he could barely see her.

'How long was she limp?' he asked.

'Only for a moment,' the man said. 'Ben here and me were watching telly while Cathy was feeding her in the bedroom.

Cathy screamed but by the time I got there she was okay again. But Cathy's *that* scared. Said she looked awful. We wrapped her up and brought her straight to Doc Maggie.'

'Okay, unwrap her,' Max said tersely. 'Fast.' He turned back to the living room, calling to Maggie. 'Where's your bathroom?'

'Shall I come?' Maggie called.

'Stay where you are,' he growled. The last thing Maggie needed was cross-infection, and she had to stay still. 'Bathroom?' he demanded again.

'Door on the right of the hall,' she called, sounding bewildered.

He glanced again at the baby, touched her face lightly with the back of his hand, felt how hot she was and knew he was right. 'You go in there,' he told the frightened parents. 'Strip off all her clothes and pop her into a tepid bath. Tepid. Not cold but not warm either. She's running a fever. I'm guessing she's had a febrile convulsion and she needs to get cool in a hurry. You're to keep her in the bath and keep her cool until I come back. I have an emergency in the other room.'

'But Doc,' the man said. 'We want Doc Maggie.'

'Doc Maggie's the emergency,' he snapped. 'I'm a doctor, too, and I'm all there is. I need to take care of her.'

'How do we know you're a doctor?' the man said, fear and belligerence mixed. 'We want Maggie.'

'Pete,' the woman said, and she'd peered past Max into the living room. Seen what was there. 'Maggie's pregnant. If anything happens to Maggie the whole community's in trouble. Just thank God there's another doctor. Shut up and do what he says.'

Betty was asleep. Maggie was still slumped against the cushions, looking anxious. And exhausted. And pale.

'Febrile convulsion?' she queried.

'I'm assuming so,' he told her. 'But I'll check her when your baby's been checked.' He was worrying in earnest now. She was looking too shocked, too pale. If he'd messed around this long and she was bleeding… 'Lie back and let me see.'

So she did, and in the middle of chaos there was suddenly peace.

There was no way to rush an ultrasound. There could be no urgency about it. He smoothed the gel over her tummy, settled the paddle and started moving it with care.

The screen beside him started showing images.

She was watching, too. He didn't need to explain it to her. He moved his hand in careful, precise rhythm, taking in the whole picture with care.

He'd seen so many. This was just one baby more. There was nothing here to make his heart clench.

Only his chest was certainly tight.

One baby more…

Be professional, he told himself, and there was no choice to be anything but. He was focussing first on the placenta, moving carefully, seeing its position, noting carefully the visuals around it. He was looking for pooled blood. Looking for evidence of damage.

Not finding it.

One tiny heart, beating, beating.

A tiny fist curled close to the wand.

A tiny, perfect hand…

A miracle. Just like…

No. He felt himself blink and thought, hell, he was hardly hiding his emotions. If Maggie was watching him…

Only of course Maggie wasn't watching him. She had eyes only for the screen. He glanced at her and saw tears coursing down her cheeks, and a tremulous smile.

'He's okay,' she whispered, fighting to get the words out.

'Did you think he wouldn't be?'

'I shouldn't think. If I wasn't a doctor I wouldn't think. I wouldn't have even known about torn placentas. I'd have felt him kick and thought he was fine.'

'He is fine.' Involuntarily he flicked a tear from her cheek and it was just as well he was still holding the paddle for he was suddenly aware of an almost overwhelming urge to let it go and gather her into his arms. To take away the look of almost unbearable strain.

This woman was so alone.

'When did your husband die?' he asked gently as he moved the wand on.

‘Three years ago.’

His hand paused in mid-stroke. *Three years*.

‘World’s longest pregnancy,’ Maggie whispered, still watching the screen. Then she managed a wavering smile. ‘Sorry. William had non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, and we stored sperm before he started chemotherapy. When the chemotherapy didn’t work he said if I ever wanted to have his baby he’d be honoured. At first the thought was unbearable but gradually it seemed…right. But it took me this long and Betty’s coercion to feel strong enough, and maybe that strength was an illusion anyway.’

She winced and bit her lip, fighting for composure. ‘But, hey, it’s okay,’ she said, and struggled to smile again. ‘As long as my baby’s fine.’

‘He is,’ he said. And then he paused.

They were both looking at the screen.

‘You know you called him Archibald?’ Max ventured cautiously, not sure where to take this conversation with a colleague who was seeing exactly what he was seeing. ‘That may cause problems. Not that unusual names aren’t all the rage, but…’

‘*She*,’ she breathed. ‘My baby’s a girl.’

‘You didn’t know?’

She was staring at the screen in stunned amazement. ‘I had my last ultrasound at three months, but Betty and I always assumed it’d be a boy.’

‘Because?’

‘Because Betty has a blue crib,’ she breathed. ‘She’s been knitting blue matinee jackets for ever. Someone should alert the share market. It’s about to be flooded with blue.’ She looked again at the screen, seeing the irrefutable evidence, and she was smiling again, this time like she meant it. ‘Don’t tell Betty,’ she whispered.

‘You think she’ll be upset?’

‘She wants a boy so much, and why tell her?’ The smile faded and her voice was suddenly bleak again. ‘Do you think Betty will live to see my baby born?’

He glanced across at Betty. She’d collapsed into sleep but it was more than sleep. The amount of morphine he’d given her couldn’t explain the look of total lack of consciousness. He shifted slightly so he could reach over and take her wrist. Her

skin was parched and dry, her pulse was thready and her fingers were cold to touch.

'She needs fluids,' he said. 'She's dehydrated. And blood tests. Is she hypoxic?'

'I'm assuming so. She hasn't let me do anything but give her pain relief for weeks now. But it's okay. It's what she wants. And now…now I know my baby's okay… If you could just check the other one before you go…'

'The other one?'

'The one you left in the bathroom,' she reminded him.

He knew that. But he was moving past it in his head. Facing the inevitable.

'Okay, here's the plan,' he said softly. 'I stay here. I attend to our bathroom baby. I dress your head and your knee, I keep a check on you tonight to make sure your head injury's not causing trouble, and in the morning I find a way to get you X-rayed. Until those things happen I'm not leaving.'

She stared up at him for a long moment—and then she closed her eyes. For a moment he thought she was going to react with anger. With denial.

Instead she opened her eyes again and the relief he saw there was stunning. Her face looked lighter, younger. Free. As if an unbearable burden had been lifted.

He'd given her a promise of one night. Her eyes said it was much more.

'Thank you,' she whispered softly. 'You have no idea how much I would love you to stay.' And she reached up and took his hand and held it.

He'd finished the ultrasound. He'd sorted Maggie's need for the night. His next priority was the baby in the bathroom. He should move.

Instead he stayed, looking into her eyes while her hand held his. Just looking.

Feeling the touch of Maggie's hand, and knowing it was so much more.

Feeling a web he'd taken years to break free from tighten once more inexorably around his heart.

This woman was pregnant. This woman represented everything he ran from.

Yet still he couldn't disengage his hand.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE tepid bath had worked. When he finally made it to the bathroom he found the little family comforted and happy.

'We need two doctors so much,' the woman said as he saw them to their car a little later, the baby wrapped in light cotton and nothing else. 'We had old Doc Sharrandon, but the minute Maggie arrived he left. Said he'd waited ten years too long for retirement and he wasn't waiting a minute longer. So instead of having one ancient doctor we have one pregnant one. Not that we're complaining. Maggie's lovely, only it's too much for her.'

It was.

He saw them off from the veranda—then as he turned to go inside he paused. There was a dark shape moving down the track, behind the tractors. Or… Several shapes.

He stood watching, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the moonlight.

It was a figure in some sort of greatcoat, behind three—no, four—calves. And one dog.

Bonnie and the calves, he thought, and this must be Angus. Until now he hadn't realised it was weighing on him—the thought of calves and dog on the beach alone—but it felt great to see them come. He walked down through the garden to meet them, only to have both man and calves start away from him. Fifty yards away it was clear he wasn't getting closer—indeed, it looked as if only the dog stopped both man and calves from bolting.

He left them, walking slowly back into the house to find Maggie propped up on her cushions, watching the door with anxiety. Was she wondering whether he was true to his word—that he'd come back? More and more the knowledge settled in his mind. He couldn't leave her. The part of him that was fearful of relationships was screaming at him to stay dispassionate but it was being firmly overruled by sensations he wasn't close to understanding.

‘What’s wrong?’ Maggie demanded. Maybe his emotions were showing on his face. Who knew? If he was having trouble quelling them internally, how did he keep his face in order?

‘Nothing’s wrong,’ he told her. ‘Angus has the calves. Four calves and Bonnie, walking up the driveway right now.’

‘He’s brought them here.’ For a moment he thought she was about to cry—and once again came that stab of need to comfort. He stayed where he was but it was hard.

‘He must have seen you bring me home,’ she said, so happily that she was obviously oblivious to what he was feeling. ‘He’d have walked back looking for them.’ She sighed and managed a wavering smile. ‘Thank heaven. Can we wake Gran and tell her?’

Wake Betty? That was the last thing he wanted to do. ‘I’m about to clean your head.’

‘This is more urgent.’

‘Waking Betty?’

‘Please,’ she said, suddenly passionate. ‘It really is. If you knew how Gran’s connived for this, you couldn’t doubt it. Gran’s sole focus for the last year has been to get me and my baby here, to set Angus up with a milking herd again, and keep him safe. She’s so close to running out of time and she knows it. I had to get the calves today no matter what, and she’s desperate to know they’re here. Please.’

‘So we wake her up and tell her?’

‘No. We wake her up and show her. Can you get me a set of crutches? You’ll find some out in the garage. There’s three pairs—I reckon I’m the middle.’

‘Why do you want crutches?’ he demanded, appalled at the sudden change in her. From passive and frightened patient she was suddenly all purpose.

‘I’m going with you. And you’re carrying Gran over to see Angus’s calves.’

‘In the morning, maybe.’

‘No! Look at her,’ she said urgently. ‘Can you guarantee there’ll be a morning? Max, I know this seems dumb,’ she admitted, ‘but medicine’s not only about drugs and bed care. Betty needs this more than anything in the world and I need to give it to her. This whole night will leave me with a debt I can never repay, but you’ve said you’ll stay and we have to do this.

Please can you carry Gran over to see what she's achieved.'

He stared down into her face, saw desperation, saw passion, and more. There was love, he thought. Maggie had spoken of coercion but, whatever was between these two women, her commitment to her now was absolute.

And suddenly he thought, It's not just for Betty. Maggie must be a wonderful doctor. She cared. Where he'd spent the last six years pushing his emotions away, hers were out there, front and centre. Her husband's death hadn't taught her to protect herself. She was way too exposed.

What should he tell her now? 'You're not fit to do anything more tonight. Betty needs to sleep. To do what you ask would be crazy.'

He couldn't. Her passion was shifting his armour, finding a way in.

Tomorrow he'd put this behind him, he thought, but for tonight…he had to do it her way.

He stared down at her and she stared straight back, those luminous eyes meeting his with a directness he found disconcerting. More than disconcerting.

He should run a mile from what he was starting to feel, he thought inconsequentially, and then he thought maybe he was running out of time to run.

Maybe he couldn't run if he tried.

Time out of frame.

He was walking across an unused cow-yard in the moonlight, carrying a dying woman in his arms, with a seven-months-pregnant colleague limping along on crutches beside him.

Gran was still half-asleep. She'd roused when he'd lifted her, but Maggie had simply said, 'The calves are here, Gran. You've got what you want. You need to see them.'

She shouldn't be on crutches. He was walking slowly, worrying about her, but she wasn't complaining. Her whole focus was on what lay ahead.

Ahead was a haystack, dark and forbidding against the night sky. As they neared it Maggie paused and so did he.

'Angus?' she called, and there was no answer, but a soft lowing told them the calves were there.

‘Angus, Gran wants to see the calves she’s given you,’ Maggie called. ‘I have the doctor who helped me home from the crash. You’ll have seen him. His name’s Max and he’s carrying Gran because she can’t walk. Angus, Gran really wants to see you with the calves.’

Again, there was no response, but Maggie looked up at him and nodded, a tiny, definite nod. ‘It’s as good as we’ll get,’ she whispered. ‘Let’s go.’ She limped on.

He stood back and watched her for a moment, knowing how much she must be hurting, knowing how desperately she needed to be in her own bed, but knowing she wasn’t going to stop.

She paused and glanced back at him, questioning, and he caught himself, tightened his grip on Gran and kept going. He was rounding the haystack, following a woman he was starting to be in awe of. More. A woman who left him feeling disorientated, as if his world was shifting on its axis and he was having trouble getting it the right way up again.

And here were the calves. At the foot of the haystack, bales had been shifted to form an enclosed, warm place. Angus was behind them, a dark figure in a dark coat, out of the pool of light from a lantern he’d set up. He was holding Bonnie as if holding a shield.

‘How did you find them?’ Maggie asked, and he appeared to shrink even more.

‘Bonnie,’ he said at last, and it was as if the words were dragged out of him. ‘Brought ’em along the beach. Came up to find me. Knew something was wrong when you come home in that car. Bonnie made me go down the beach.’

‘Oh, Bonnie,’ Maggie said, and she sounded close to tears.

He wanted to hold her. He couldn’t. He was holding Betty, and Betty was awake and looking across at the calves.

Maggie was looking at Betty and in the lamplight he could see the shimmering of her tears.

‘What…what do you think of them?’ Gran whispered. Gently he set her down on a couple of hay bales, still wrapped in the blanket he’d carried her in. The calves shifted nervously as he stepped back, but they were still close enough for Betty to reach out and touch them.

There was a long silence. Max thought maybe he should say something but Maggie’s hand came out to catch his. She leaned

on him, heavily, and instinctively his arm wrapped around her waist to support her.

She leaned on him some more, and the pressure of her hand told him to stay silent.

He stayed silent. He held onto Maggie.

Family, he thought suddenly, and the same feeling he'd had when he'd seen the farmhouse came over him. It was a longing, deep in his gut, for something other than the solitary path he'd elected to travel.

Family? This? There were commitments all over this place. For Maggie to accept such responsibility… Her strength left him awed and his hold on her tightened instinctively.

Betty had asked Angus if he liked the calves. She was waiting for him to answer, and Max could see Angus knew he had to say something. And he knew by the tension in Maggie's body that she was desperate for Angus to respond.

'Yeah,' he said at last, and it was a beginning.

'They'll be milkers,' Gran whispered. 'It's just the start. Now Maggie's here you can have your herd again.'

'We could use the milk from these for cheese,' Angus said, in a voice that sounded rusty from disuse. 'Until we build the herd up enough to sell milk to the co-op again.'

'Yes!' It was still a whisper but Gran's tone was almost triumphant. She turned to Maggie. 'Four calves are a start. If you buy Angus another every time you can afford it… Promise me you will. Promise.' The last word was such a fierce demand that he felt Maggie flinch against him.

'I'll do my best,' she said.

'And you'll help her.' The old lady was suddenly staring at *him*. 'You'll help her. Yeah, you will, I know it.' She closed her eyes, as if exhausted and Max was spared having to answer. 'It'll be okay. Farm's safe. Will's son'll be here. It's okay.'

'Gran,' Maggie said roughly, sounding desperately anxious.

'Yeah, it's time to go to sleep,' Gran said, without opening her eyes. 'And if your fella'll give me another shot of that morphine stuff, I'll take it with pleasure. You'll do that?'

'I will,' Max said, because there was nothing else to say, and the pressure of Maggie's hand in his increased.

Thank you, the pressure said. Thank you.

More and more he had no idea what he'd been propelled into.

This was a weird setting, so strange he felt as if he'd been transported to another world.

But there was peace here, of a sort. Angus was waiting with ill-concealed impatience for the people in the tableau to disappear so he could be alone with his animals. Maggie was leaning against him, taking strength from him and giving him warmth in return. An old lady was saying goodbye.

Maggie was weeping openly now, tears slipping down her cheeks unchecked. He held her tighter, and he felt her shudder against him.

'Can you carry Gran back to bed?' she whispered.

'I'll do that, and then I'll come back for you.'

'I'll make my own way,' she whispered. 'I always have and I always will.'

He looked down at her in the moonlight, a woman who needed to be cared for, yet who was worrying about everyone around her. She worried about more than just these two people, he knew. She worried about the whole community.

Maggie. The word alone was making him feel strange, like he'd never known what a woman could be until now.

He was involved until the morning, he told himself. No more.

Did he believe it?

First things first.

Leaving Maggie—as ordered—he carried Gran back to the house. She roused enough to direct him to her bedroom, a room of grand proportions overlooking the front garden. He tucked her into a huge bed heaped with faded eiderdowns, he injected more morphine and he thought she was asleep. But as he made to leave, her hand came out and grasped his.

'Thank you,' she whispered. 'You've made it perfect. I can go now. Look after them for me.'

Her eyes closed again and he stood looking down at her, trying to take in what she'd just said.

It was a farewell, and by the look of her…

She desperately needed fluids, he thought, touching the back of her hand, pressing the dry skin back a little and watching it stay where he'd pressed it. She was so dehydrated.

She was emaciated. Weary. Done.

If this woman presented at Emergency right now, the wheels of medical technology would move into overdrive.

He should at least set up a drip to get fluids in.

But he knew instinctively that this woman wouldn't thank him for extending her life. He didn't need to talk to Maggie to know it. The decision had already been made.

She was dying and she knew it. So how did he react to the old lady's request. *Take care of them?*

What sort of request was that?'

Should he rouse her and say 'Hey, I'm a passing stranger, stuck for the night but out of here first thing in the morning.'?

As if he could rouse a dying woman and tell her that. But not to tell her…

He could tell her nothing. She was already asleep.

He flicked off her bedside lamp and left, feeling that a promise had been made regardless. By failing to deny her…

Nonsense. She had no right to ask anything of him, and he had no need to answer.

Move on, he told himself harshly. Move on to Maggie?

He came out into the living room, expecting her to be there, but there was no sign of her. He'd come ahead with Betty, and he thought she'd have struggled back on her crutches. Apparently not.

He swore and went out again, to find her sitting on a low stone wall by the garden gate. Just sitting, staring into the night.

She should be in bed, too, and those wounds still needed dressing. He came up behind her and saw her shudder. Involuntarily his hands rested on her shoulders. She flinched, and then, unexpectedly, she leaned back into him.

'She'll go now,' she whispered. 'Thank you for caring for her.'

The night was growing more and more surreal. He'd turned into Gran's treating doctor?

There was nothing for it but to agree. 'I expect she will,' he agreed. 'Unless we get proactive.'

'There's no point. But today… It would have been a disaster without you.'

'I suspect it was a disaster because of me,' he said ruefully. 'If I hadn't driven around that bend…'

‘You had every right to drive around that bend.’

‘Come inside, Maggie,’ he said gently. ‘Can I carry you?’

‘No point,’ she said, and sighed. ‘Sorry. That sounded ungracious, but there’s not a lot of use in getting accustomed to leaning on anyone.’

Yet still she leaned on him.

‘You’re cold.’

‘I do need to go inside,’ she agreed with reluctance.

‘You don’t want to?’

‘I want to run,’ she whispered. ‘I’m so tired.’

He hesitated. There were things he should be doing. Carrying her inside, cleaning her face, strapping her knee, putting her to bed as he’d just put Gran.

But out here the stars were hanging low in the sky. From over at the haystack came a soft lowing as the calves settled down for the night. Angus would be with them. As Max had left, carrying Gran, he’d turned back and seen the elderly man settling onto the straw with an expression on his face that was almost joy. Angus and Bonnie wouldn’t be leaving their charges.

They wouldn’t be coming to the house to help Maggie, either.

How alone was this woman?

What was he doing? There was still something inside him yelling go no further, ask no questions, back off. He couldn’t. The old lady’s words were like a spell cast across the night. *Take care of them.*

It wouldn’t hurt, he conceded. For one night he could help, and maybe he could help by staying outside with her for a little. Instinctively he knew she didn’t want to go into the beautiful old house. No matter how Maggie had filled it with flowers, no matter how she’d fought to keep it lovely, for now age and infirmity had taken over, leaving an intangible air of impending sorrow.

His hands rested on her shoulders, gently, yet with a message he didn’t need to say. I’m with you, was his unspoken message. You’re not alone.

But he had to leave her for a moment. She was growing colder.

‘Wait,’ he said, and strode swiftly into the house, searching for what he needed. When he returned she hadn’t moved.

He set an eiderdown around her shoulders. He put another

across her knees, tucking it under her, and then, because he had no taste for martyrdom, he wrapped a third around himself. Then he sat down beside her. Close.

'That's piles taken care of.'

'Piles,' she said, cautiously.

'Never let your backside get cold,' he said seriously. 'First thing they should teach any medical student. Nasty things, piles.'

He felt rather than saw her smile, and felt also a tiny lifting of tension. Great. Those smile lines round her eyes had come from somewhere. He didn't like it that they seemed to be getting rusty from disuse.

His arm wrapped around her waist and held. He could feel the warmth of her body through the eiderdown. That meant she could get warmth from him. That felt okay, too.

More than okay.

'You want to explain the calves?' he said, for want of a point to start. For a little while he didn't think she'd answer, but then she started, staring out at the stars like her story was written there.

'It's Gran's dream. The great plan. To get me back here, to have William's son inherit the farm, to give Angus back his milking herd.'

'William's son,' he said cautiously. 'As in the little girl you're incubating right now?'

'Yeah, and Archibald turning into Annie's the least of our problems. It's all a bit of a dream,' she said dryly. 'Gran's dream and my dream, all mixed up.'

'Do you want to share?'

'Do you want to listen?' But then she seemed to catch herself. 'Look, this is nothing to do with you. There are probably places you should be. To ask you to stay the night is big—to make you share any more is crazy.'

'I'm not volunteering to fix anything,' he said. 'Just listen if you want to talk.'

And it seemed she did. She sighed and unconsciously leaned closer. 'Okay, potted history. I'm English and so was William's mother. William's father—Betty's son—is a hotshot businessman who left the farm when he was eighteen, moved to England and has never been back. William was therefore brought up in

London. We met as interns, we fell in love, we married, and we were typical Londoners. Only William used to talk about the Australian farm his parents had sent him to when they'd wanted to get rid of him over the school holidays. He spoke of an awesome gran, a fabulous farm and a wonderful community at Yandilagong. He kept saying we'd move here one day, set up practice, have bush kids.'

'Dreaming?'

'It was more than that,' she said softly. 'Neither of us had happy childhoods. The thought of a farm and country medicine and family sounded so magical we thought we'd get the training we needed and go. Only then Will died. I was miserable and alone, working in a dreary little haze, until I got a letter from Betty.'

'Reigniting the dream?'

'That's a good way of putting it,' she said, still staring out at the stars. Still letting her body share warmth with him. 'I have no idea why Will told his father he'd stored sperm, or why his dad told Betty, but she knew. She wrote and said if I wanted to have Will's baby then why not come here and live. She told me there's a self-contained apartment at the back of the house so I could be as independent as I wanted. She could help with the baby. I could get a part-time job helping the doctor in town. She even enclosed a lovely letter from the Yandilagong doctor saying there was a vacancy here for as much work as I wanted.'

She gave a wry chuckle then, which made him think she should laugh more. Her laugh was rusty, with traces of bitterness, but still he liked it.

'And so?' he asked, and she sighed and the chuckle faded.

'So then I got dreamy and impractical. I'd been in a fog of grief and apathy since Will died, and suddenly I thought why not? I don't intend to marry again—not after the sort of heart-ache Will and I went through—but to have Will's baby seemed like a giant leap into the future. I thought if it didn't work out at the farm I could always leave. There'd be lots of jobs for part-time doctors in Australia. So I went through IVF in London and when I was four months pregnant I came.'

'To find…'

'What you see,' she said, and he could tell she was trying hard

now to keep bitterness at bay. ‘Betty’s here, and Angus. Angus is Betty’s son, Will’s uncle. Will had met his shy Uncle Angus who lived in a separate house on the farm, but he knew little about him. Now I realise how disabled he is. He has high-level Asperger’s, which means he’s intelligent enough to care for himself, but he’s pathologically afraid of the outside world. Betty’s been in and out of hospital for the last couple of years, and by himself Angus has let the farm fall apart. Betty’s had to sell the milking herd and half the land to recoup, and she’s now terrified that when she dies he won’t be able to stay here. So her plan was to induce me to come, help her care for Angus, and work as a doctor while she minded the farm and the baby.’

‘But she must have been ill when she wrote to you.’

‘Yes, but she didn’t intend the chemotherapy not to work. Hope has to feed on something. So I walked straight into a mess, but by the time I’d been here for twenty-four hours I knew I couldn’t walk away. I am…I *was* William’s wife. William loved Betty. He loved this farm. To turn my back on them…I can’t.’

‘I see,’ he said slowly, and he did, and he was seeing chasms everywhere. He’d also seen the way she’d looked at Betty. Maggie’s husband had loved his grandmother. Like it or not, deception or not, Maggie’s allegiance was inviolate.

She was some woman. A feisty, loyal, doctor.

A woman to make his heart twist…

‘It’s not a great story,’ she said across his thoughts. ‘I…. Thank you for listening.’

‘I wish there was more I could do.’

‘There isn’t.’ She hesitated. ‘So why gynaecology?’

‘Sorry?’ he said, startled.

‘I’ve told you mine. You tell me yours.’

‘We need to get those wounds dressed.’

‘You’ve been saying that for hours. Another ten minutes won’t hurt.’

‘There’s nothing to tell.’

‘I watched your face as you watched my baby. There’s shadows.’

‘My shadows are none of your business.’

‘They’re not,’ she agreed obligingly, and tugged her eiderdown closer and pushed herself to her feet. ‘Sorry. Of course I don’t want to know if you don’t want to tell me.’ She looked

thoughtfully out to where he'd parked his car beside the last tractor in the row. 'There's probably a really logical reason, like gynaecology makes more money than obstetrics.'

'So it does.'

'And you can sleep uninterrupted at night.'

'So I can.'

'But that's not the reason.'

How did she know? He couldn't figure it out, but there was something about this night, something about this woman, that said only the truth would do. It was none of her business, but suddenly it was.

'I lost my wife when she was six months pregnant,' he said, and she plumped straight back down beside him. Close. Her hand took his and held it.

'Oh, Max…'

'Past history,' he said. 'Six years ago. A case of the doctor's wife getting the worst care. I was an obstetrician. She died of pre-eclampsia.'

'You're saying it was your fault?'

'I should have monitored her more closely.'

She frowned. 'You wouldn't have been the treating doctor. She'd have had her own obstetrician?'

'Yes, but—'

'So how often would you have checked her blood pressure if you'd been in charge?' To his astonishment she was sounding indignant.

'That's not the point.'

'It is. Unless you ignored swollen ankles and puffy hands and breathlessness and any of the other signs.'

'She didn't—'

'She didn't have obvious signs until too late,' she finished for him, as if she knew. As indeed she might. 'You know as well as I do that pre-eclampsia can move really fast. Terrifyingly fast. You'll be pleased to know I take my own blood pressure twice a day, but I'm paranoid and if I was your wife and you tried to take mine twice a day I'd be telling you where you could put your cuff. Tell me about your wife. What was she called?'

'Alice.'

'That's a lovely name,' she said warmly. 'Was she lovely?'

'I… Yes.' But he said it hesitantly. Sadly even. Aware that the

memory of the lovely, laughing girl he'd met and married so long ago was fading. Aware that photographs of her were starting to superimpose themselves over real memory.

'It's awful, isn't it?' she said confidingly, breaking a silence that was starting to be too long. 'You think you'll remember for ever. You think how can you ever move on? It's impossible. And all of a sudden…' She paused, then gave herself a shake, tossing away thoughts she obviously didn't want. 'And your baby?'

'A little boy. He lived for twenty-three hours.'

'And you called him…'

'Daniel,' he said, and he was suddenly aware that it was the first time he'd said it since the funeral. Daniel. A tiny being, robbed of his mother; robbed of his life.

Odd that his memories of Alice were fading, yet the memory of that tiny part of him, Daniel cradled in his hands, his son, was still so strong. Still so gut-wrenchingly real.

'I'm so sorry,' she said, and the pressure of her hand was warm and strong. Maggie would certainly be a great doctor, he thought. Empathic and caring and…lovely?

Lovely. There it was again. It wasn't a professional word, he thought, but it was in his head and it wouldn't go away.

'So?' she said.

'So I abandoned obstetrics, left England and came to Sydney to be a gynaecologist,' he said, too briskly, and rose to his feet. 'End of story. You need to go to bed.' He sounded rougher than he'd intended.

'I do,' she admitted.

'Let me carry you. That leg must be giving you hell.'

'It's not tickling,' she admitted, and somewhat to his surprise she didn't object as he gathered her up in her pile of eiderdowns.

'Maybe it's time we both moved on,' she said as he carried her through the roses, and he didn't disagree at all.

The fire was dying in the grate. He settled her on the settee again, loaded the fireplace with logs, found a can of soup, made them both soup and toast—he was hungry even if she wasn't—and bullied her into eating.

Then, finally, he tended her face and her knee. And all the time…

Lovely.

The word kept echoing over and over.

Which was crazy. And impossible. She was seven months pregnant. He was mixing her up with his memories of Alice, he thought as he worked. He had Alice in his mind—that it was Alice he was helping, It was Alice he could save.

No!

But there were memories coming at him from everywhere and the only word that kept superimposing itself on all of them was…

Lovely.

He had the gentlest hands.

She was drifting. He was cleaning her face, carefully ridding it of every trace of dirt, then making it secure with wound-closure strips and dressings. Occasionally what he was doing hurt, but she hardly noticed.

His face was so close to hers. Intent on what he was doing. Careful.

Caring.

How long had it been since someone had cared for her? How long since someone had even opened a can of soup and made her toast?

It was an illusion, she told herself. This man was trapped by circumstances, in the same way she was trapped. The only difference was that tomorrow morning he'd leave and she'd stay.

But somehow the bleakness had lifted. For tonight she could let herself drift in this illusion of tenderness. She could look into his face as he worked, watch his eyes, abandon herself in their depths. Feel the strength and skill of his fingers. Watch his concern.

He was worried about her. She should reassure him, she thought. She should say she had things under control, everything was fine, that she'd bounce up in the morning like Tigger. As she'd bounced before.

Only right now she didn't feel like Tigger. Surprisingly, though, neither did she feel like Eeyore, for who could feel sorry for herself when a doctor like Max Ashton was right in front of her? He was so close she could take his face between her hands

and…

And nothing. Get a grip, she told herself, and something in her face must have changed because Max's hands lifted away and his brows snapped downward.

'Did I hurt you?'

'I… No. I believe I'm nearly asleep.'

'I need to wash your knee.'

'Go right ahead.'

'You want to wriggle out of what's left of those jeans?'

'I can do that,' she said with an attempt at dignity, and then tried and it didn't work, and when Max gave up watching and helped she was pleased. Only then his hands were on her thighs and she thought that was pretty good, too.

Whoa. Keep it in focus, Maggie. He was a doctor and she was a patient.

She felt like she was drifting on painkillers, yet she'd had nothing. She felt drifty and lovely, and like it was entirely right that she was lying half-naked on a settee in front of a roaring fire with the man of her dreams taking her leg in his hands.

The man of her dreams?

'Ouch!'

Yikes, that brought her down to earth. Earth to Maggie? It was about time contact was made.

'Sorry,' he said ruefully. 'But it's not looking as bad as I thought.'

'Good,' she said sleepily. 'Excellent.'

'Have you been worrying?' he asked, sounding bemused.

'I guess I'll worry if it's about to drop off,' she said. 'Speaking of dropping off…'

'You want me to carry you to bed?'

'I'm fine here.' The thought of going out to her apartment at the back of the house seemed suddenly unbearable.

'You are fine,' he told her. 'Some of that initial swelling's already subsiding. I think you've simply given this one heck of a bang. I suspect the X-ray tomorrow will show a nice big haematoma at the back of the knee and nothing else.'

'Excellent. Then life can get back to normal.' She hesitated. 'You know, I don't really need you to stay.'

'I need to stay,' he said. 'You banged your head, you shook your daughter about and you need to be in hospital under

observation. If that's not possible, you're stuck with me.'

'Or you're stuck with us. I'm sorry.'

'Forget it,' he said roughly, and then looked contrite. 'Sorry. 'It's okay, though. Just forget the sorry and think of it as one colleague helping another. You look like you need far more help than I can possibly give, but one night out of my life isn't much.'

Put like that, it even sounded reasonable that he stayed, she thought. And there was no way she was arguing any more. Not when she wanted him to stay so much.

For all the right reasons, she told herself hastily. For very sensible reasons, which had nothing to do with the way her insides did this queer little lurch when he looked at her.

"You want to use Gran's settee?' she managed.

'You want me to stay here with you?'

She did. It sounded wimpy and she had no right to ask him. There were plenty of spare bedrooms. But…

'This room's warm.'

'So it is,' he said, and suddenly he was smiling.

'I—it seems a waste to heat another.'

'It does,' he agreed. 'And it'll mean I can check your vital signs during the night without getting up. Also it'll mean I don't need to get my sleeping bag from the car.'

'You don't need to check my vital signs.' But the night was getting fuzzier and she was getting past arguing. 'You have a sleeping bag?'

'For camping. At the music festival. Not that I needed to. My friends organised us a camp that'd make a Bedouin sheikh jealous.'

'Your friends?'

'Fiona did most of the organising. She's a radiologist and she's a very organising person.'

Fiona. He had a girlfriend, then. Of course he did. Anyone with a smile like that would have a partner. There was no reason then why her somersaulting insides would suddenly somersault in a different direction.

It was too much. She was too tired. She needed to sleep and not think of problems and how she was going to manage with an injured knee and how she could check Gran through the night when she was so tired and what she was going to do tomorrow.

Without Max. Who had a girlfriend.

‘Do you need help with the bathroom?’ he asked, and she had to think about it before answering.

‘I can manage,’ she said with another of her dumb attempts at dignity.

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘Very well,’ he said, and smiled and lifted her eiderdown and tucked it up under her chin. And then, before she knew what he intended—before she could even guess he’d thought of such a gesture—he bent and kissed her.

It was a feather kiss, maybe a kiss of reassurance, of warmth and of comfort. But surely such a kiss should be on the forehead. Not on the lips.

But on her lips it was.

His mouth brushed hers, and it was as if the heat of the room was suddenly centred right there, and it was a surge of warmth so great it was all she could do not to reach out and hold him and lock the kiss to her.

Only her hands were under the eiderdown. Thankfully. Because to hold this man…

To hold him would be a shout that she needed him, that she was alone, she was bereft and he was everything she most wanted but could never have.

William…

She made herself say her husband’s name in her head but it didn’t work. There was nothing there.

William. Gone.

Max. Here. All male.

‘Goodnight, Maggie,’ he whispered, and she could have wept as he drew away.

‘Goodnight,’ she made herself whisper back.

She closed her eyes. She didn’t want to, but she did.

William, William, William.

As a mantra it had no strength at all.

Max. She wanted him to stay. Right here. Right now.

For ever.

CHAPTER FIVE

She woke and sun was streaming in the windows. Max was kneeling in front of the fire and it was morning.

It was well into morning. Her eyes flew open, she stared at the sunlight flooding the room and thought this was no dawn light.

Her eyes flew to the grandfather clock in the corner and as if on cue it started to boom.

Nine booms. Nine o'clock!

'And how any of you ever sleep with that thing is a mystery,' Max murmured, kneeling to blow on the embers as she stared at the clock as if it had betrayed her. The embers leapt to life—of course. Would they dare not if this man ordered?

He looked… He looked…

Much cleaner than last night, for a start. He looked like he'd showered. He was wearing clean jeans and a clean shirt, though he had the sleeves rolled up as if he meant business.

He looked like he should always be here. Making her fire in the mornings. Living in her house. Just being here.

But then he turned to her and she saw the strain on his face and inappropriate thoughts went right out the window.

'Betty died at six o'clock this morning,' he told her, and her world stilled.

'Died…'

'You were sleeping so soundly that short of a bucket of cold water I couldn't rouse you. I couldn't bring myself to do it. I'm sorry.'

'Betty,' she whispered, and she felt a wave of grief for the old lady, a grief so strong it threatened to overwhelm her.

Though she'd known Betty by her correspondence and via William for longer, she'd only known Betty personally for a few months. For most of those months she'd been angry. Betty had conned her into coming, had trapped her. But despite her anger she'd never doubted Betty's motives. She'd manoeuvred Maggie

into coming for love of a son, for love of her son she had no other way to protect.

Maggie's hands went instinctively to her own belly as her baby gave a fluttery kick inside her. Who knew what she'd do to protect this little one?

When did a mother's love die?

'Angus…' she whispered.

'Angus was with his mother when she died.'

'Angus was!' She stared at him, incredulous. In the whole time she'd been here Angus had never been in the house. It was almost as if he was afraid of it.

'I thought they'd both want it,' he told her, squatting back on his heels and meeting her gaze with steadiness and truth. 'I thought if Angus has been farming for years he'll understand what death is.'

'But how did you make him come?'

'I told him what was happening. I told him what I thought he should do and he agreed.'

'But to make him listen…'

'I know. I went over to the haystack, he backed away so I simply said his mother was dying and needed him to sit with her. Then I came back and sat on one of his tractors until he came. It took him half an hour to work up the courage, but he came. I stayed on the tractor and told him what Betty's condition was, and finally he decided he could come into the house. Betty woke, just for a moment, as he arrived. He held her hand until she died.'

'Oh, Max,' she said, awed. And then, 'Oh, I should have done that.'

'I think your body was simply demanding you stopped,' he said gently. 'And to be honest, Maggie, it wasn't you Betty wanted. She had a tiny sliver of awareness left, and it was all for Angus.'

'Oh, Max,' she said again, and burst into tears.

He moved then, like a big cat, covering the distance between them as if it was nothing. She'd half risen but he gathered her into his arms, as if that was where she'd been heading all along, and he held her close.

And maybe his arms were where she had been heading. She didn't know—all she knew was that right now she needed him. She clung to him, he held her close and in those first few

moments of grief she let out the emotions that had welled within her for years.

How long since she'd wept? Even the night William had died… His parents had been there and they'd been angry with her because she and William hadn't consented to some new and amazing treatment they'd heard of in the States. It didn't matter that William was far too ill to travel by the time they came on board with their offer to send him. Their anger had surrounded her, deflected her grief, making it seem like she had no right to a grief that was all theirs.

So now here she was, three years later, sobbing out grief for William's grandmother instead, being held in the arms of a complete stranger, letting it out, letting it out.

She didn't care. She simply sobbed until she was done, and when he laid her back on the cushions and she finally managed a watery smile, she knew the time for crying was over.

'Thank you,' she said simply. 'If Betty had Angus with her then, yes, she had everything she wanted. And she saw him with the calves last night.'

'And he saw *her* with the calves,' Max agreed. 'He knows they were a gift from his mother. He's back with them now. He even talked about burials.' He smiled. 'He seemed to think the back paddock'd be a good place but I managed to talk him out of it. We discussed where his father was buried and thought that'd be okay. I believe you'll be able to talk it through with him when you're ready.'

'But—'

'I've organised the undertaker to come in a couple of hours,' he said. 'And I've rung the coroner. He agrees that since the old doctor left detailed notes before you arrived, outlining Betty's condition as terminal, I can certify her death, even though I didn't see her until last night.'

'How did you know all this?' she asked, dazed.

'You have her medical file on the dresser,' he said. 'I read it during the night.'

She took a deep breath. This was huge. She couldn't sign Betty's death certificate herself—not when she'd been sharing a house with her—but without a certificate from a treating doctor, the police would have had to be called; a coroner's inquest required.

Max had circumvented it all.

'You've been awake all night?'

'Most of it,' he admitted, and motioned to the grandfather clock and grinned. 'Ben here kept me company.'

'You could have moved,' she said, but then she thought back to vague memories of the night. Once or twice, early in the night, she'd stirred. She knew she had. Both times Max had been right by her, asking about her pain, just there until she'd drifted off again.

She'd slept because he'd been right beside her.

Clearly not all the time.

'I checked on Betty just after midnight,' he continued. 'I thought she was slipping then, but it was faster than I thought.'

'Oh, Max.' She gulped and swallowed, not knowing what to say. There was nothing to say.

'There's more,' he said. 'If you're up to listening.'

'More…'

'I've had the night to think,' he told her. 'In between Ben's timely announcements to the world. Maybe I should warn you that my theatre staff consider me a little bit…well, maybe their term might be domineering. And organised. Maybe to the point of obsession. I do like a good plan.' He shot her another of his disarming grins. 'So I've done some preliminary planning.'

'I don't understand.'

'I know you won't be able to take it all in right now,' he said sympathetically. 'So just listen and take in what you can. Ideally you need time to say goodbye to Betty, to plan her funeral, to let your leg heal and to get over the shock of the last twenty-four hours. I think you need to lie on this settee for the next week—possibly even until your baby's born. Only there's no one to take over your work. I took four days off for the music festival, which gives me today clear but that's it. I have a huge surgical waiting list—I do all the major public gynaecological surgery for South Sydney—so, like it or not, after today I'm no help at all. So I need to act fast. First we get you showered.'

'We?'

'Objection at step one?' he demanded quizzically. 'You're hardly steady enough to shower alone.'

'If you've already showered,' she said with another of her

futile attempts at dignity, ‘you’ll see there’s rails and a seat set up for Betty.’

Betty. So much emotion.

‘Okay, you have rails,’ Max conceded, watching her face. Obviously seeing her need to get independent fast. ‘Next item on list is letting people know about Betty. William’s parents? Will they come? Your own parents?’

‘Not happening.’ She shook her head, trying to rid herself of a wave of self-pity. Of want. Of need.

Because her need wasn’t for her parents, who’d been a tiny part of her life before they’d sent her to boarding school at six, or William’s, who simply wouldn’t care enough to come, but for this man who she’d known only since last night and she had no right to need at all.

‘Friends?’

‘Betty has a town full of friends, but if you’ve let the undertakers know, the word will be around town already.’

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘That’s easy. So now we move to stage three of my plan.’

‘Your plan. For world domination?’ she asked, cautiously, trying to smile.

‘Better. I’ve found you a locum.’

‘Max!’

‘Yeah, I know this is way too much organisation,’ he said, and raked his fingers through his dark hair with the air of a man who wasn’t sure where to start. ‘But, hell, Maggie, you’re a basket case.’

What? Imperceptibly her spine stiffened and her eyes flashed. ‘What did you call me?’

‘A basket case.’

‘I am not!’ *A basket case.*

‘Okay, only a tiny bit of a basket case,’ he said hurriedly. ‘The rest of you is pure, brilliant competence. But for the little piece of you that might need to put her leg up for a time… Maggie, do you need the income from your medicine?’

For a moment she thought about not answering. This was so not his business. But he was looking at with such concern, how could she not?

‘I have William’s insurance,’ she conceded.

‘Excellent. So if you aren’t emotionally committed to practising medicine for the next few months, then you don’t need to. You know you’ve had two calls this morning already?’

‘Two calls?’

‘Neither of them serious, both of them I’ve referred to the medical tent at the festival,’ he said. ‘But I can hardly leave you to run yourself into high blood pressure.’

‘I’m not like Alice.’

‘No,’ he said, and caught himself. ‘No.’

‘So?’

‘So nothing,’ he said, suddenly cool and professional. ‘Blood pressure or not, you’ve been overworking and under-eating and it has to stop. So here’s my plan.’

Grief and shock had taken a back seat for the moment—fascination had taken its place. This was a man in move-a-mountain mode. Bemused, Maggie decided it might just behoove a girl to lie back and let him move it.

I have an internist friend who’s looking for work,’ Max said. ‘John’s a forty-year-old doctor from Zimbabwe. His wife, Margaret, is a dentist. John’s a highly trained doctor and he’s just finished his supervised assessment for accreditation in Australia. He had a job lined up in northern Victoria but it fell through last week. I rang him this morning and sounded him out about taking on the position of locum here for a while.’

‘You rang him?’

‘Just to check he’s still available,’ he said, still sounding clinically detached. As if he was handing out a prescription. ‘But to say he’s eager is an understatement. He has two young daughters who think the beach sounds great, and he’s free right now. If they can stay here while they size the place up, they can be here tomorrow. John can act as locum and if you’re interested in a long-term arrangement—even a partnership—that might work, too.’

‘Tomorrow,’ she said, and flabbergasted wasn’t too strong a word for it.

‘I have a surgical list first thing tomorrow morning so I need to leave tonight,’ he said apologetically. ‘But I rang the first-aid people at the festival. Until John arrives they’re happy for you to divert your phone through to them. They’ll cope with minor stuff

and call for help on the big stuff. So today and tonight are covered. And then… John's great. I'm sure he and his family will be sensitive to Angus and to your independence. Maggie, it'd mean someone would be here when you went into labour.'

And the professional detachment was gone. He was suddenly sounding hesitant—coaxing—as if he was trying to persuade her to do something against her will.

Against her will? Was he out of his mind?

She'd advertised for a locum but there'd been no applicants, yet here was Max, pulling doctors out of hats. To have another doctor here…

'You're kidding me, right?'

'I'm not kidding,' he said, seriously. 'And I've done nothing you can't undo.'

'Why would I want to undo it?' she demanded, feeling breathless. 'I mean, I haven't met John but if you say he's good…'

'He's good.'

'They *could* stay here,' she said, trying to take it in. 'I mean… for the short term. But there's lots of places in town for long-term rent. They might prefer it.'

'You need someone to be here when you go into labour.'

'Whoa. You sound like my mother.' Then she heard what she'd said and corrected herself in her head. *You sound like my mother ought to sound like.*

Or not. There was nothing maternal about Max Ashton.

There was nothing maternal about the way she was feeling about Max Ashton. Or the way the concern in his eyes made her feel.

'I'm very maternal,' he said, and grinned, and, wham, there it was again, that smile.

She couldn't afford to get sucked into that smile.

What was she thinking? Betty was dead, she reminded herself frantically. That ought to be enough to deflect her. She should be grief stricken. But after last night…

No. Grief had very little place here. She and Betty had grieved together during the final stages of the illness. Now there was an aching sense of loss, but with it a huge relief that Betty had gone as she'd wanted, in her own bed, with her son by her side,

knowing all was safe with her world.

And that was because of this one overbearing, domineering doctor with a heart-stopping smile. Whose plans she had to focus on because she was feeling as if she was about to be swept up in a tidal wave. Any minute now he'd offer to paint her baby-crib pink.

Or not. She looked again at his face and saw strain behind his smile, and thought this was hard for him—planning for her when he wanted nothing to do with pregnancy.

'You don't need to worry about me in labour,' she said, fighting to get her face in order. 'I'm having my baby in Sydney.'

'You are?'

'That was about my only sensible stipulation before I came here,' she said. 'I've organised an apartment in Sydney before and after the birth. I told Betty I was doing that before I even came to the farm.' She gave him a shame-faced smile, thinking she sounded a wimp. 'I thought there'd be a family doctor here, but I wanted back-up. And, yes, I realised going to Sydney will leave Yandilagong without a doctor, but there's nothing I can do about that. I can't be on call when I'm in labour.'

'You don't think?' he demanded, and suddenly the tension was easing. 'What's wrong with you? What a wuss.'

'I am,' she said, and discovered she was smiling back at him. And more—the lump of grief around her heart since she'd learned that Betty was dead was lifting away.

Was she fickle as well as cowardly?

'Hey,' he said softly, and he cupped her chin with his middle and index fingers, lifting her face so her eyes met his. 'It's not wrong to smile now,' he said softly. 'Betty knew it was her time. She planned everything and it happened exactly as she wanted.' He smiled gently into her eyes, forcing her to smile in return. 'Yes, she might be somewhere now where she has inside knowledge that her carefully orchestrated grandson is, in fact, a girl, but she can hardly come back and demand a rerun. So let's send her up a little message that girls can run farms, too, accept that she died happy and move on.'

'I will,' she said, and suddenly, inexplicably, she sniffed. It was the way he was looking at her. Like he cared…

What was it about this man? He was turning her into a sodden heap.

‘Good girl,’ he said softly. ‘Will you accept John and his family to help you?’

‘I… Yes.’ What else was a girl to say?

‘Great. Are you sure you don’t want help with that shower?’

‘No, thank you,’ she told him, but it was a lie. She’d have loved help with her shower. Only she was a big girl and big girls didn’t lean on big boys. Doctors didn’t lean on their colleagues.

Maggie didn’t lean on Max?

Without Max it would have been a ghastly morning. As it was… showered and fresh, she said her goodbyes to Betty while Max hovered in the background, filling in technicalities, smoothing the way for Betty’s departure.

It was he who contacted the priest from Betty’s church, and who let him in as Maggie finished a needfully long shower. It was Max who hiked his brows as Maggie produced a list of instructions as long as her arm to give to the priest. It seemed Betty had planned her funeral right down to the Wellingtons and moleskins she wanted to be buried in, but it was Max who went through the list with the priest, ensuring Betty could have exactly what she wanted.

It was Max who stood beside her as she rang William’s parents —as she heard their irritation that Betty’s death had come at such an inconvenient time and really they couldn’t come right now.

‘Told you so,’ she mouthed at Max as they talked, and he smiled and gave her a thumps-up, you-were-right sign, and what would have been an appalling call was made lighter.

Then he made calls to more distant relatives for her—yes, sadly Betty was dead, no, sorry, Maggie couldn’t come to the phone right now, she was understandably upset, the funeral arrangements would be in the local paper tomorrow if they wanted to come. While Maggie nursed her third mug of tea for the morning and watched and thought this was hero material and all Max needed was a Superman outfit and he’d be right up there, leaping tall buildings, with her tucked neatly under his arm.

No one could deny Superman.

So calls made, he accepted no more arguments, but put her in

the car and headed for Yandilagong. It took half an hour to navigate the main street as the festival was still going full swing but finally they reached the clinic. This had been set up by the old doctor, and Maggie now used it as her surgery. She went to clamber out of the car with her crutches but there were crowds of people on the pavement and someone jostled her, and Max swore and was at her side in an instant, picking her up yet again and carrying her through, regardless of her protests. Superman still.

But then he paused.

'Max!' It was a shout from across the street. Max turned with his burden still in his arms.

A woman was running lightly across the road. Beautiful. Sleek, cream jacket, casual jeans, lovely silver ballet flats. Gorgeous blonde hair, straight and glossy as a shampoo advertisement, the fringe pushed back with designer sunglasses. A wide, white smile.

'Fiona.'

Fiona. The girlfriend.

Lois to Superman's Clark Kent, while the wimp in his arms was simply some woman he'd rescued before he moved onto the next task.

'I thought you had a call back to Sydney,' Fiona said, clearly astounded.

'I did,' he said. 'But I had an accident on the road and was forced to stay. Fiona, meet my accident. Dr Maggie Croft, meet Dr Fiona Hamilton. I told you about Fi last night. She's a radiologist.'

'Hi,' Maggie said, feeling really, really at a disadvantage. Lying back in Superman's arms was scarcely a way to endear yourself to Lois. Or to Fiona.

This woman was also a doctor. That made three of them, but there wasn't a lot of professional recognition in the way Fiona was looking at her. Well, what do you expect if you go around carried in Superman's arms, she demanded of herself. She was the victim here. The rescuee. Superman's armful.

'You didn't go back,' Fiona said blankly, looking from Maggie back to Max.

'No. As I said, I was stuck.'

'You really did have an accident?' Fiona's gaze shifted to the

Aston Martin. As if to verify the claim, there it was, a smashed headlight, a crumpled left panel and a crack running the width of the windscreen.

'Oh, your car,' she said in horror, and put her hand to her eyes as if she couldn't bear such hurt. 'Oh, your gorgeous car.'

'Maggie was hurt, too,' he said brusquely. 'I'm taking her in for an X-ray.'

'You're X-raying her here?'

'Apparently it's not as much a backwater as you might think,' Max said. 'I gather there's basic X-ray equipment.'

'I don't understand,' Fiona said. 'Why are you carrying her?'

'Because he's bossy,' Maggie said, finally deciding she needed to be helpful if she was ever going to get this over with. 'Max won't let me use crutches. The fact that I was fine on them last night…'

'Max stayed with you last night?' Fiona asked, incredulous.

'Yeah, and with Grandma and Angus and our cows and our dog,' she said, deciding to pre-empt trouble before it got a hold. 'He was really useful. But I don't want him to drop me, so…'

'I'll come in with you,' Fiona said, sounding bemused, and stood aside and let them both pass. 'You stayed with her last night, Max? You stayed in the same house as real people?'

'Don't be impertinent,' Max retorted, and Fiona grinned as if it was a shared joke.

Great. She so didn't want to be here, Maggie decided. If they were in Superman territory she wouldn't mind a telephone box to disappear into.

Or was she thinking Doctor Who? A bit of time travel to a different place.

But there was no avoiding practicalities. Max had to let her down to unlock the building. She opened it, entered her security code, then sat down speedily in the chair next to the door, because to tell the truth both knees were wobbly now. She could cope with Max here, but Fiona's presence completely unnerved her. She made her feel about ten.

'The X-ray machine's in there,' she told Max, pointing to the next room. 'If you set it up, I'll come in when you're ready.'

'How out of the ark are we talking?' Max said cautiously, while Fiona looked on in obvious bewilderment.

‘State of the art,’ Maggie retorted. ‘Or,’ she added honestly, ‘it was state of the art ten years ago. The old doctor got it second hand from Gosland hospital when they extended. For nice plain skull and knee pictures it’s fine.’

‘You’ve used it recently?’

‘It really is fine,’ she said, growing incensed. ‘What, you think we should have brought a small animal to test it on first? How about if Fiona volunteers a toe?’

Maybe that was uncalled for. Dumb, really. She didn’t know this woman, and to include her in a stupid joke…

But Fiona looked as if she hadn’t even heard. She tugged open the door and stared through at the X-ray equipment, becoming efficient. ‘I’ll check it for you, Max,’ she said briskly.

‘Wow,’ she muttered. ‘I have my own gynaecologist *and* radiologist.’

She was ignored. They were both in clinical mode. She had a sudden vision of them both back in Sydney, two hugely qualified specialists, totally focussed on their work.

Beside them she felt like a country hick. A patient to be cared for with clinical efficiency and kindness.

That’s what Max had been doing all night, she thought dully. Caring for her with kindness.

‘There’s nothing complicated here,’ Fiona called. ‘So what were you intending to do today? Make sure she’s okay and then come back to end the festival with us?’

She? *She’s the cat’s mother*. A saying used to teach children it was impolite to refer to people impersonally.

She, the patient. She, the inanimate object, causing trouble.

‘I’m still heading back to Sydney,’ Max told her, equally brisk, ‘just as soon as I know Maggie’s not going to do anything dramatic.’ Without waiting for a response—or an okay—he lifted Maggie again and carried her through. Still talking to Fiona. ‘We were always going back separately anyway. You know I have a list in the morning, and Clarissa and Doug are staying until it ends. I can’t wait until then.’

‘It’s pretty dreary,’ Fiona said. Max laid Maggie down on the prepared trolley, and Fiona manoeuvred the overhead X-ray machine over her knee. She slid a pillow underneath with the ease of a professional, as if she’d done it a million times before.

As she must have. This was a simple technical procedure. She wasn't X-raying a patient. She was X-raying a knee.

'Clarissa and Doug are bickering,' she said. 'Brenda's boyfriend turned up and I've had enough music. I'll come home with you, as soon as you're ready.'

'Fine,' Max said. 'Are you okay there, Maggie?'

'Fine,' she repeated. Feeling like a sack of potatoes. Wanting, pathetically, to say, 'Hey, this is about me.'

'Do you have leather shields?' Fiona demanded, still not looking at her. 'We need to protect the pregnancy.'

The pregnancy. Not the baby. Not *her* baby.

'In the side cupboard,' she said through gritted teeth, and Max fetched them and set them up so they formed a barrier between the X-ray machine and her belly. Her daughter.

Annie? Not Archibald. She had a bit of thinking to do on that one.

Chloe didn't seem right any more.

'Right. Keep still,' Fiona said. 'Hold the position. Max, get out of range.'

So Max moved back behind the door and Fiona clicked and then clicked again.

'And her head,' Max said,

'Her head. Why?'

'She gave it a bang when we hit last night.'

'So why didn't you X-ray it last night.'

'Maggie's grandmother died last night. We couldn't leave her.'

'She died…'

'Of old age,' Maggie said wearily, not wanting any more questions, wanting this conversation to be over. 'That's why Max stayed. He was wonderful. But I don't need him any more and you both need to be in Sydney. Can we get on with this, please, because, like you, I need to go home.'

Her X-rays were fine, beautifully read by Fiona. Torn ligaments in her knee that would heal in time. Nothing wrong with her head. Fiona wished her all the best for her recovery—and for her pregnancy—and left to go back to their 'camp' to pack. Max drove Maggie back to the farm and the closer to home they got the drearier she felt.

Why had meeting Fiona made everything seem worse? Heavier?

They pulled into the driveway and she recognised the vehicle at the front gate. Who wouldn't? A silver hearse is unmistakable in anyone's language.

Max cut the motor and went to get out, but she put her hand out and stopped him.

'You don't have anything inside?'

'No, but—'

'But then it's time for you to go,' she told him, trying to make her tone firm and sure. A man and a woman were waiting for her on the veranda, dressed in sombre grey. That was her future, she thought. Grey.

Grey with a baby daughter? She gave herself a mental slap to the side of the head and made herself smile. Maybe grey until she'd buried Betty and her knee stopped hurting, but in the long term she'd be fine. More than fine. Max had conjured up a locum. Even the sight of the staff from the Yandilagong Funeral Parlour didn't have the capacity to dim that.

'You've been wonderful,' she said. 'But Fiona's waiting.'

'She's not—'

'You know she is. And I don't need you any more. Last night I did need you, and I'll always be profoundly grateful that you were here for me. And you've found me a locum. You have no idea how grateful I am for that.'

'You know that John might stay long term if you want to share.'

'I might just want to,' she said. 'But that's for the future. So thank you again.' She tugged her crutches over from the back seat and opened the car door.

'Maggie?'

She turned back to him.

'I could stay another night and leave at dawn. I don't want you on your own.'

'I have a sore knee,' she said, pushing herself out of his gorgeous car. 'That's all. I can manage by myself. And, besides, I have Angus and cows and dog and tractors. What's alone about that? Meanwhile, you have your own life you need to get back to. Thank you.'

He looked across at her—and then before she knew what he

intended he was out of the car, coming around to her side, taking her crutches and placing them against his precious but increasingly battered car.

'Maggie, thank *you*,' he said heavily. 'You've reminded me…'

He paused. Reminded him of what? she thought, but she looked at his face and knew he wouldn't answer. Knew he didn't know how to answer.

'John's good,' he said inconsequentially, and she nodded.

'If he's worked with you I imagine he must be.'

'He can work with everyone. Kids. Babies. He's okay.'

'Are you saying you're not okay?' she asked gently. 'Because you no longer work with babies?'

'I'm fine.'

'I hope you are.' And then, because he looked…lost? No, surely that was too strong a word for it, just a little bewildered, as if Superman's world was a bit out of kilter and he didn't know how to put it right. And she thought, Why not?

Why not? She really wanted to do this. She wouldn't see this guy after today. What was the harm?

When she really, really wanted to do it. Fiona or not. What difference would a kiss make?

And before she could examine the thought any further, her hands came up to take his face and draw his mouth down to hers.

Only his mouth was already moving. To hers.

And for one long, sweet moment sanity flew out the window.

There was nothing sensible about kissing Maggie. There was nothing planned. He only knew that her lips were on his, that his hands were on her waist, drawing her into him, feeling a blast of want and need so great it threatened…

Well, it didn't threaten. It simply did. Did remove sanity. Did remove acknowledgement of how crazy this was, how inappropriate, how stupid.

Nothing mattered but the surety that he was kissing her.

She tasted of honey. Honey, he thought, and had a flash of recall, hours ago, sharing toast and honey. It must have stayed. Or maybe honey always clung to this woman.

As did sweetness.

As did heat.

For heat was what he was feeling—heat surging through the linking of their mouths, through the fire he felt in his hands at her waist, through the way her body curved and clung as her lips parted to welcome him into her. She was aching for him to deepen the kiss, showing a need that was at least as great as his own.

Did he need her?

That was a crazy thought, too, for of course he didn't need her. He never could need. To expose himself to that sort of pain… No!

So he'd leave this afternoon and never come back. She'd get on with her own life and he'd get on with his. But strangely, unaccountably it made his immediate need even greater. Knowing that this might be the only time—this *would* be the only time—that he could hold her in his arms and let desire hold sway.

She was so lovely—achingly lovely. She was simply dressed in pregnancy jeans and windcheater, she was battered and tired and very pregnant—yet lovely had been one of the first things he'd thought when he'd seen her, and he thought it again now.

Her body was all soft curves. Her pregnant belly moulded against him and he found himself curving to accommodate it. A man taking his woman unto him.

He was deepening the kiss—deepening, deepening, deepening, until all he felt was her and all he knew was her, and the rest of the world could float away for all he cared.

Only, of course, it didn't. It couldn't. The woman on the veranda was clearly not amused at being kept waiting. She'd walked down to meet them. She'd stopped four feet away from them and coughed, a cough that said this wasn't appropriate, she could understand sympathy this morning but she couldn't understand passion.

Dammit. He felt Maggie shift in his arms, withdraw, become conscious again of her surroundings, and he wanted to shout 'No' and tug her closer, but the woman coughed again and he wanted to strangle her.

Reluctantly, achingly, he let Maggie pull away, then stood, holding her at arm's length, gazing down at her bewildered eyes.

Her mouth was lush and full, her lips just kissed…

But behind them the woman was looking confused.

'Dr Croft?' she said.

'That's me,' Maggie said, and there was a definite shake to her voice. 'I'm sorry I've kept you waiting. 'Dr Ashton was just kissing me goodbye.'

Goodbye.

The word stung—but that's what this was. For one long moment he teetered, a part of him wanting to say, no, it's not goodbye, this is just the beginning. But then Archibald—or was it Ernestine?—kicked, and Maggie glanced ruefully at her abdomen and so did Max. And there was her baby between them.

Reality slammed back, and remembered pain. No. He wasn't ready for this. He'd never be ready. Exposing himself to the pain he'd felt six years ago… No and no and no.

Where to go from here?

Nowhere.

To leave seemed impossible. To leave seemed like leaving part of himself behind.

'Fiona's waiting,' Maggie said. 'I'm sorry about the kiss. You don't have to tell her.'

'Fiona's not—'

'Max, just go,' she said, and her voice was really trembling. 'Please. I can cope myself. I will be fine. I'll be better if you go.'

'I don't want to leave you.'

'You must,' she said gently. 'You have your world and I have mine.' Her chin jutted a little and she forced herself to smile. 'You go and get back to your life. But thank you for being wonderful. My hero.'

She hesitated for a moment, then lightly stood on tiptoe and kissed him again. Only this time it was different. It was a fleeting, final kiss of farewell.

And then, very deliberately, she turned her back on him. She nodded decisively to the woman waiting. 'Let's go inside. I've kept you waiting long enough.'

She made her way slowly on her crutches up to the veranda and he watched her go and she didn't turn back once.

Max was free to go.

She didn't look back. If she had she would have wept. As it was, the woman from the undertaker kept giving her odd glances.

This was a small community. It'd be all over town by nightfall that she'd kissed a stranger—that Dr Maggie had a love life.

She didn't have a love life. She'd kissed him and it was entirely inappropriate. He had a girlfriend. What was she thinking?

She was grief stricken, she decided as she let the two undertakers into the house. Of course she was. That was it. Anything could be excused on the basis of shock and loss.

She wasn't herself. Tomorrow she'd wake up and be back to nice sensible Maggie, who knew her place and was properly horrified by today's behaviour.

Was he gone?

It was so hard not to look back.

He drove back to town to collect Fiona and the further he drove the worse he felt. He'd left Maggie alone with the undertakers. How would she cope?

She'd cope magnificently. She was one magnificent woman.

She was bereft, alone and hurt.

She'd kissed him.

There were so many conflicting emotions he didn't know where to start sorting them into any sensible order. For, of course, there was no sensible order, and when he collected Fiona and she started talking serious clinical medicine, serious hospital politics and the difficulties of progressing up the hospital's hierarchy, he was grateful.

Medicine blocked out the white noise. He'd learned that when Alice died and he retreated back to it now.

Only…when he arrived back to the hospital the white noise followed him, ready to descend at any sliver of opportunity. He worked until midnight, he did a session in the gym and confusion followed him to bed.

Maggie, Maggie, Maggie.

He'd organised her a locum. John seemed delighted at the chance to help, and he was having a tough time not shoving him aside to take the job himself. He was jealous?

How stupid was that? Really stupid.

But still he lay and stared at the ceiling until dawn.

Maggie. Babies. Family.

The whole heart thing.

He could still feel Daniel in his arms. He could remember every wrinkle, every precious feature of his tiny son. He could remember the joy of being married to a woman he loved, but superimposed on that joy was aching, tearing loss.

To open himself again to that sort of pain…

No.

So stay away.

But the funeral…

He could bear everything else, but the thought of Maggie at Betty's funeral was too much. The thought of her standing at a graveside as once she'd stood at William's grave, as he'd stood at Alice's and Daniel's…

No.

So… This last thing he'd do for her. He'd arrange work so he could go to the funeral. He'd stay well back—if possible she wouldn't even see him. If she was surrounded by family and friends then he didn't have to go near. If she saw him he was simply paying his respects, visiting John to see if things were working out, taking his car for a run.

No harm there.

The decision released a twist of pain in his gut and he closed his eyes in relief.

But still he didn't sleep.

Maggie.

CHAPTER SIX

As funerals went it was a biggie. Betty had lived and worked in Yandilagong all her life, so even though it rained—sleet, in fact—half the population of the district turned out for the service.

But as Betty's only close family member, Maggie was left alone, regarded with deference and respect. When William had died, her friends and colleagues had surrounded her. No one in this community knew her well enough yet to think they had that right. So the undertaker's assistant held an umbrella over her while she tossed roses down onto the coffin in the little graveyard overlooking the sea, and she felt more alone than she'd ever felt in her life.

Angus hadn't come. Of course not. He'd said his goodbyes the night his mother had died and that was that.

He was okay, though, Maggie thought, for now he had two little girls intruding on his solitude. John, the locum Max had miraculously found, had been at the farm for three days now. It had taken John's children—Sophie, six, and Paula five—about three minutes to find the calves and Bonnie. Angus was attached to them, so they attached themselves to Angus. Angus watched them with the same kind of wariness he used for anything he didn't understand, but after only a day he decided they were just like the calves, not posing any threat to his personal space.

Neither did their parents. John and Margaret seemed wary about sharing a house with Maggie, cautious of her privacy and carefully respectful. They were lovely people but they let her alone.

But right now she didn't want respectful isolation. She wanted to be hugged.

It wasn't going to happen.

The ceremony was over. She turned away from the grave and the undertaker's assistant left to bring the car close. People moved respectfully back from her. She looked bleakly out toward

the road—and Max was coming towards her.

He was dressed for a funeral, in a dark suit and tie, a magnificent, deep grey overcoat—cashmere?—and a vast, black umbrella. He looked absurdly handsome. He was moving toward her as others moved back.

She was still on crutches. He waited until she reached him and then he smiled, that crinkly, tender smile that made her heart do back flips.

'Why are you here?' she asked, suddenly breathless.

'I thought you might like me to be.' He glanced around at the crowd, backed to a respectful distance. 'I'm so sorry I'm late. I had an emergency at dawn that took a lot longer to sort than I expected, and I couldn't leave halfway through. But now I'm here, can I help? Do you want a ride to the wake, or do you need to ride in the hearse?'

'I don't…I don't…'

'I've put my hood up,' he said enticingly, and he sounded so eager she almost smiled.

She did smile. *It was so good to see him.*

And then he had his arm around her waist, tugging her against him so she was under the shelter of his umbrella with him. She was wearing a raincoat with a hood. It hadn't been working. Now she was held hard against him, protected from every quarter.

It was so good to feel him.

'I came via the farm,' he told her as he ushered her into his lovely car. 'John and Margaret told me where to find you.'

He'd had the paintwork fixed, she noticed. She was glad. She really liked this car. Or maybe it was the way she felt about its owner.

Maybe…maybe she should listen to what he was saying.

'John thinks this place is great,' he said, sliding in behind the wheel. Taking charge with smooth authority. 'He can't believe the medical set-up. I gather Margaret's already talking about setting up a dental practice. You guys have done a lot of organising in three days.'

He was deliberately making his voice practical. He must know instinctively that emotion was the last thing she needed now.

Of course he knew. He'd been to funerals himself.

‘There’s work for half a dozen doctors in this district if I could ever get them to come,’ she said, struggling to come to terms with too many emotions and match his composure. That was what she needed—composure. No matter that the man beside her made her feel so breathless she was practically gasping.

‘No one wants to be the only doctor in a small town, because there’s no back-up,’ she managed. ‘To find John was a miracle. You want to wave your magic wand and produce more?’

‘I’m no magician.’

‘No.’ She paused. Maybe no was the wrong word. He felt like a magician. Her personal genie, appearing when she most needed him.

‘No family at all?’ he asked gently, looking back at the clusters of people dispersing into their cars, and his look acknowledged that she wasn’t a part of any cluster.

‘No.’

‘Surely there’s someone…even back in England… Someone who cares.’

Hey, this was getting personal. What about composure?

‘I have lots of friends,’ she said, drumming up indignation, and he smiled.

‘I’m sure you do. But do you have any friends who might drop everything and race to the aid of a Maggie who needs them?’

‘I don’t need them,’ she said with dignity. ‘I… Thank you for coming, though.’

‘My pleasure.’ He hesitated. ‘If I’m welcome I thought I’d stay for the wake—or whatever you call it here. We’ve both done this,’ he added strongly, as she made to shake her head. ‘I’ve buried Alice and Daniel. You’ve buried William. This can’t be nearly as bad, but from what I remember it’s an endless process of standing, tepid tea in hand, thanking, thanking, thanking.’

She couldn’t think what to say. She glanced across and saw in his eyes the recognition of shared pain.

A funeral of an old lady should be a celebration of a life well lived—and this was—but it inevitably brought back memories of funerals that hadn’t been timely. Funerals where pain had been raw and deep.

‘You’ve got the whole day off?’ she asked.

‘I’ve rearranged things. I need to be back in Sydney tonight but

I thought I could give you this day.'

'Gee, thanks,' she retorted before she could help herself, and his smile returned, deepening, making his grey eyes dance.

'Noble's my middle name and I'm addicted to tepid tea. You want to make use of me or you want me to go away?'

What was he asking? Was he mad?

Did she want to stand in the funeral parlour's reception rooms, as he'd said, alone, drinking endless tea, receiving words of consolation from hundreds of people she didn't know? Or did she want Max's solid presence beside her? Just there if she needed him. There if she just wanted him.

This was an extraordinary gesture. If he'd phoned last night and said 'Should I come?' she'd have said no, but he was here now. He was here and it'd take a stronger woman than she'd ever be to knock back his offer.

'Yes, please,' she said, in a rush before either of them could change their minds.

He was offering his strength for a day and she'd take it.

Secretly, she knew she'd take anything this man was prepared to give.

It seemed, as he'd predicted, an endless day, and at the end of it, when everyone had gone, when the last neighbour had wrung the last bit of nostalgia from the occasion, Max drove her back to the farm.

It was still raining. They drove along the long line of tractors and Maggie felt herself trying to work out a way she could make him stay longer.

That wasn't fair. She knew it. But…

'Would you like to come in and have dinner?' she asked as they pulled to a halt. 'Margaret's cooking for me as well tonight. I…I'm sure there'll be enough to share.'

'She already asked me,' he said gently. 'I refused.'

'Oh.'

His face grew suddenly grim. 'Maggie, I don't think I can ever go down the road I went with Alice. I can't get involved again.'

Well, that was blunt to say the least. 'Involved?' she said cautiously.

'I think we both know what I mean.'

Whoa. Suddenly things were going where they had no right to be going. At least he was being direct, but…

'You're thinking I'm on the catch for another husband,' she whispered, and suddenly anger was there, surging whether she willed it or not. She did will it.

He thought she was a victim, she thought suddenly, incensed by the knowledge. A passive, needy woman who might cling. A woman who'd kissed him the last time they'd met, whether he'd willed it or not, and he probably hadn't willed it; he was probably just being kind. To a sex-starved widow, seven months pregnant with another man's child.

'I don't think that,' he started.

'Just as well,' she retorted. 'So what about Fiona?'

'Fiona?'

'Your girlfriend.'

'Fiona is my colleague. I don't have a girlfriend. There's been no one since Alice.'

'How very noble,' she snapped. 'I hope Alice is up there polishing your halo, ready for you to join her.'

'Look, it's just that I can't do relationships any more,' he said, forcing out the words. Trying to explain something he didn't fully understand himself. The impotence and the grief of not being able to help his lovely Alice, and the knowledge that such pain again would kill him. 'It's not fair to mess you around.'

But Maggie wasn't looking at him with sympathy, or with understanding.

Whew. Anger was good here. Anger was great. It pushed away any embarrassment, gave her the words that needed to be said and the dignity to say them.

'How can you be messing me around?' she said, stiffly and coldly. 'I kissed you—yes, I did kiss you, and very nice it was, too. Given half a chance I'd do it again. Only that's all it was—a kiss—nothing to do with my life. And if you think I'm about to turn into some helpless, clinging female…'

'I didn't say that.'

'You didn't need to.' She gritted her teeth. 'Thank you very much for today. It was very kind. You've been very kind to me all round, and if there's any way I can repay you, please let me know. But I don't need anything else. I'm sorry you can't stay for dinner, because you know what? John and Margaret are fun and

the kids are gorgeous and it would have made a grey day better. You might even have enjoyed it. But for anything else, forget it. Okay, enough. Thank you again.' And she grabbed her crutches from the back and climbed out of the car.

The rain was pelting down. He grabbed the umbrella and headed for her side of the car but she turned away from him.

'No,' she threw over her shoulder. 'Go away. You don't want to get involved and neither do I. And you never know when a desperate widow might change her mind, grab you by the hair and drag you into her lair before you can fight back. Get out of here, Max Ashton, and keep safe.'

'I didn't mean—'

'Yes, you did,' she retorted, and limped away fast through the tangle of garden. 'Yes, you did,' she yelled again. 'Go find some other maiden to rescue. This one's been rescued enough, so you need to move right on.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

She was right. He needed to move on.

He didn't hear from her for six weeks. He put her right from his mind. Or he tried to.

Work was his salvation but he extended his operating schedule to the point where Anton, his anaesthetist, finally said cull it or find a second anaesthetist to share the load.

'That break was supposed to do you good,' he said morosely. 'Instead you've come back ready to work the rest of us into the ground. You know what? We were hoping you and Fiona might have worked something out. You could both do with a love life.'

'I don't want a love life,' he growled.

'But you need one,' Anton said bluntly. Anton had a wife, a three-year-old and one-year-old twins, he was permanently sleep deprived and he thought the rest of the world should join him in his glorious domestic muddle. 'A good woman and half a dozen kids would take the edge off your energy and protect us all.'

'You do the procreating for both of us,' Max growled. 'You're good at it. I'm not.'

'Practice, man. Just find the right lady. I'll admit Fiona's not perfect—I can't see the chief radiologist of Sydney South having much time for diapers—but there must be someone to suit you somewhere.'

There was, Max thought grimly. He'd found her. He just didn't have the courage to take it further—to step into the abyss of commitment.

So he'd stay clear of entanglement and he'd work.

But like it or not, as he worked he realised he was feeling the same roller-coaster of emotions he had felt in the months after he'd lost Alice. There was an abyss in front of him, only he didn't know where. If he put his foot down he wasn't sure the ground would still be solid. The feeling left him even more sure that the only way forward was to keep right away from Maggie.

But his thoughts weren't staying away from Maggie. A dozen times a day he wanted to get in his car and go to her. Only the fact that his workload was horrendous saved him. He was always needed in Theatre, in the wards, in his consulting rooms.

The situation wasn't sustainable. He'd thought the inexplicable magnetic attraction he'd felt for her would fade but if anything it strengthened. And then, at the end of the sixth week, he had a phone call from John at the farm.

'How's Maggie?' he demanded before he could help himself.

'We're all fine,' John said jovially. 'It's working out brilliantly. There's so much work here, and it's a great little community. But, hell, Max, the place is the epicentre of a medical desert. I'm run off my legs already, and the moment Margaret put up her plate she had so many teeth coming through her door she was tempted to take it down again.'

'Yeah, but Maggie…'

'She's fine, too. Except… That's why I'm ringing.'

'Except what?' He was right back there again, feeling the terror he'd felt when Alice had shown the first signs of pre-eclampsia. Leaning against the wall for support. Knowing this was illogical and emotional, but there was nothing he could do about it.

'Margaret's worrying.'

'Why?'

'Because she's alone,' he said, and Max's world righted itself again. Alone. That wasn't terrifying.

It wasn't great, though. Alone? Why the hell was she alone?

'She can't have the baby here,' John said. 'The only doctor's me, and I'm not prepared to give obstetric support without back-up. All the women from around here need to go to the city to have their babies. Mind, if we had a really good obstetrician…'

'Get on with it,' Max growled. Damn, he'd sussed John was good, but he didn't appreciate him being this good—not only helping Maggie but starting to put pressure on others to help. Namely him.

'Okay,' John said, chuckling, and Max thought briefly through jumbled emotion that Zimbabwe's loss was Maggie's gain. 'It's just Maggie's organised herself an apartment at Coogee for the next couple of weeks until she has the baby. She chose Coogee

because it's a beach location where she can walk and swim, and it's close to the hospital she's booked into. Which also happens to be our hospital. I mean, your hospital.'

Coogee. A suburb of Sydney not ten minutes' drive from where he was taking this call. Max drew in his breath, suddenly feeling trapped—pulled towards the abyss. 'She's coming here?'

'She's already there. She left on Sunday. So I thought I'd give you a heads up so you could look out for her.'

The implied responsibility rattled him further. 'She's not a friend, John,' he said, before he could think about it, and there was a moment's stunned silence from the end of the phone. He could almost see John's brows snap down in surprise—and disapproval.

Fair enough. Maybe he even disapproved of himself.

Maybe what he'd said had been stupid. And cruel?

But would Maggie think of him as *her* friend? Maybe not, he conceded. She'd been so angry the last time he'd seen her…

'She's *my* friend,' John said at last, gently chiding, and Max caught himself.

'Sorry. I mean…I was just thinking… Why did she book herself in here for the birth? There are many hospitals in Sydney.'

'I believe she booked herself into Sydney South before she even came to Australia,' John said, growing more disapproving by the moment. 'I don't believe she did it to annoy you. But if you don't think of yourself as her friend…'

'I do.' He raked his fingers through his hair. 'Sorry, of course, I mean I guess I do. It's just that I hardly know her.'

'You came to her grandmother's funeral. The locals said you held her up all afternoon. Physically.'

'She needed holding up.'

'Well, maybe she needs holding up again now,' John said brusquely. 'She's left here and gone to stay in a hotel apartment until the baby's born. She doesn't know anyone in Sydney and we're worried. So worried, in fact, that Margaret says if you won't promise to keep an eye on her then she'll leave me here with the kids and go and keep her company herself. So I'm asking you to check on her.'

'She'll want solitude,' he said, clutching at straws.

'You're kidding me, right?' John demanded. 'She's not like

Angus. She's a sociable, chirpy, intelligent colleague. The girls and I are already half in love with her. We can't bear to think of her being alone. But if, as you say, you don't see yourself as her friend…'

'All right,' he said, goaded, and then heard himself, heard his anger, and felt small. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I've had one hell of a morning. I'm run off my feet.'

'Yeah, I'm hearing that, too,' John said. 'So why are you running yourself into the ground?'

'There's work…'

'And there's delegation,' John said. 'You ever heard of it? Yeah, I know, it's none of my business, only Margaret and I worked in that place ourselves and gossip travels fast. We still hear things. So you met Maggie, you hugged her all through the funeral but you haven't phoned her since, you're working yourself into the ground and now you react like a scared wimp when I suggest you keep tabs on her.'

'Why would I be scared?'

'You tell us and we'll both know,' John said cheerfully. 'Okay. Margaret wouldn't let her go without giving us her address. You want it, or do we have to figure some other way of taking care of her?'

Max raked his hair again. Did he want her address?

Short answer, no.

Long answer? Long and very complicated answer?

Of course he did. Yes.

The beach was glorious and she had it almost to herself.

It was early September. There were lifesavers watching her with lazy care, and she liked that. She also liked it that she was almost the only one in the water apart from a couple of German tourists whooping it up in the shallows.

It was Wednesday. A working day. Even those not at work thought it was too cool to swim. Too bad for them, she thought, backstroking lazily along the backs of the waves. She'd swum this morning and now, in the late afternoon, she was swimming again. After the rush of the past few months this was bliss. She had nothing to do but swim and float and watch the expanding bump that was her daughter.

She was so-o-o pregnant. Her belly button had turned inside out. She felt the size of a small whale. A whale's natural environment was water, she thought, rolling happily over and over in the surf. This was where she was meant to be. Wallowing.

Ooh, it was lovely to be off her feet. Ooh, it was lovely to be here, even if she was alone.

She wouldn't be alone for long, she told herself. She had a week to go, give or take a few days. Very soon now she'd have her daughter.

It wouldn't stop her being lonely.

Now, *that* was crazy talk. She gave herself a mental scolding, as she'd been doing a lot since she'd left the farm. She wasn't alone in the least.

John and his family had moved into the farmhouse. They were lovely and they were giving her all the support she needed. Angus was happy, with his tractors and his calves and his dog. So she had John, Margaret, Sophie, Paula and Angus, plus the community of Yandilagong. After Betty's funeral she'd learned just what belonging to a small community really meant. She had enough tuna casseroles and jelly cakes and cream sponges in her freezer to last her a lifetime.

Her future looked far less isolated and a lot more calorie laden than she'd ever dreamed possible.

So why was she lonely?

It's because I'm alone right now, she told herself, in the manner of one talking to someone being deliberately dull-witted. Lonely means alone.

You've been alone since William died.

I haven't felt alone. Not for a while now. Or not achingly alone.

Not until I met Max.

And there it was, the crux of the matter. One drop-dead gorgeous doctor and her whole world had been thrown out of kilter.

So put him out of your head, she told herself for about the thousandth time since Max had left. Just swim and don't think of him.

She did a couple more laps of the patrolled part of the beach,

then watched the German couple decide it was time to call it quits. Maybe it was time for her to do the same. Reluctantly she turned toward the shore—and saw a man striding down the sand toward her. A man who looked vaguely familiar.

Really familiar.

She stared in disbelief, thinking she was dreaming.

She wasn't dreaming.

Max.

For a moment she thought wildly about swimming out to sea. The last time she'd seen him she'd been so angry. So humiliated. She tried to dredge up that anger now—and failed.

She floated and watched him greet the lifeguards, haul his shoes and socks off, roll up his chinos and stroll down to the shallows. He was shading his eyes with his hand so he could see better.

She was doing the same. Treading water, shading her eyes, trying to watch him.

Max.

A wave, bigger than usual, rose behind her. Acting on impulse, she caught it and let it carry her all the way to the beach. Or almost all the way. Her bump grounded her about twenty feet before the rest of her would have.

She surfaced, wiped the water from her eyes, pushed her curls back and he was about six feet away.

'What are you doing here?' she managed, and he looked down at her for a long moment without replying. As well he might, she thought.

She'd decided buying a pregnancy swimsuit was a waste of time—who was there to appreciate it except her? Her modus operandi was to wear a sarong to the beach, tug it off at the last minute and get into the water fast. She was wearing a faded pink bikini. The top was respectable—well, almost, though her bust had grown considerably bustier in her pregnancy. She couldn't see her bikini bottom. It was somewhere under her bump.

Max, on the other hand, looked cool, collected and casually fabulous. Business shirt without a tie and the top buttons unfastened. Rolled-up sleeves. He was carrying shiny black shoes, socks tucked inside.

Very neat, she conceded. Whereas she…

She didn't want to think about what she was.

‘John said I should check on you,’ he told her, and she winced. Of course. It wasn’t like he was here because he wanted to be.

‘I’m good,’ she said. ‘John should have called. I would have told him I was okay and spared you the trouble of making the trip.’

‘I wanted to see you.’

She stood up, awkwardly because of her bulk. He made an instinctive movement to help—and then stopped.

She saw it. He didn’t want to help. He didn’t want to touch her.

Okay, then. She stood knee deep in the shallows and shook herself like a dog, her curls flying every which way. She’d braided her hair but it refused to stay braided in the surf. She looked whale-like and wild, she thought.

Not Max Ashton’s sort of woman at all.

‘So there you go,’ she said tightly. ‘You’ve seen me. Okay?’

‘Maggie, can we talk?’

‘If you get any closer you might mess with me.’

‘That was a dumb thing to say,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry I said it.’

She glowered, but then she thought, no, this was childish. She could be the grown-up here. Maybe it’d even make her feel better to act magnanimously. ‘It’s okay,’ she conceded graciously. ‘I was acting a bit needy. I needed to be pulled up.’

‘You didn’t. I was out of line. I’m sorry.’

Was this what happened when you were magnanimous? You got someone feeling nicely off balance and guilty in return. Excellent. ‘Thank you,’ she said, still attempting grace. ‘Apology accepted.’ She didn’t move, though. Walking forward, out of the water, seemed a bad idea, and walking closer to him seemed worse.

Not to mention the fact that her walk was now more like a waddle. Not a lot of grace there.

‘You swim amazingly,’ he said, still sounding stilted.

‘For an Englishwoman,’ she finished for him, eyeing him with caution. Trying to figure where to go from here. ‘William spent most of his summers at Yandilagong. Betty taught him to surf and he taught me. Just after we finished medical school we did a rotation at Durness in Scotland. Do you have any idea how cold the sea water is around Scotland? This place is a sauna in comparison.’

Was she gabbling? Maybe she was.

'This still looks winter-cold to me,' Max said, and, yes, he was looking at her as if she was gabbling. He still seemed wary.

Did he still think he had the capacity to get to her?

However true that might be, she refused to be got to.

'You're dreaming.' She eyed him challenging. He looked so collected. So not part of this beach scene. She desperately wanted to get things on an equal footing. 'It's not cold,' she lied. 'Come in and try it.' She raised her brows in mock challenge.

'I don't have swim gear.'

'Are you wearing boxers or jocks?'

'I…' He seemed thoroughly disconcerted, as well he might be, she thought. Even more excellent. She wanted him disconcerted and she wasn't backing off.

'Well?'

'Boxers,' he conceded reluctantly.

'Then where's the problem?' she demanded, amazing herself at her effrontery. What was she doing? She didn't care, though. What was there to lose? 'Your audience would be two male lifesavers and me. You'd hardly be playing to a packed gallery, Dr Ashton.'

He'd never do it. Or would he? She stayed right where she was and watched the cool, collected, man of the world, his expensive jacket flung over his shoulder, his Italian brogues in his hand, think about his dignity.

Saw the exact moment when he decided to lose it.

He gave her a long, considering look—then walked twenty yards up the beach, dropped his jacket and shoes on the dry sand and then dropped everything else except his boxers. Taking her breath away.

The first time she'd seen him she'd thought he did serious gym work. Stripped to his boxers she was sure of it.

This man was a doctor. He spent his days in hospitals with sick people. What was he doing having a body like this? It was all she could do not to gape.

Maybe she did gape, but luckily he was already hitting the water, running into the waves as if he was a man decided on a mission and determined not to let a little thing like icy water stand in his way. She saw the first shock as he hit the water, and

she saw his determination deepen. She watched as he launched himself into the surf by diving head first into the first wave, swimming out past the breakers and then body-surf back in again. She watched, and she thought there were serious things going on here, serious things in her head that she didn't know what to do with.

He was worried he'd mess with her head?

He already had.

She had to get herself together. He surfed back to her, right to her feet, then stood up. Water was streaming down his face. His hair was flopping wetly onto his forehead. He looked ten years younger, ten years more…more…

Whoa. This seriously pregnant woman does not need complications, she told herself, and knew she already had complications in droves.

'You lied. This is c-cold,' he muttered, abandoning bravado, and she grinned and sank back down into the water and rolled herself over and over in the shallows.

'Wuss. I've been in for half an hour.' Then she relented. 'Okay, at first it's cold. You need to swim to warm up.'

'You've been swimming that long?'

'And loving it. I'm getting wrinkly now—it's time I got out—but if you want to keep swimming I'll join the lifesavers on guard duty.'

'Maggie…'

'Just swim,' she advised him kindly. 'You look like you're a man who needs to get something out of his system. I don't know what it is but, whatever the problem, I've always found exercise helps. Off you go and enjoy yourself.'

'You're not going to swim with me?'

'Closeness isn't a good idea,' she said, and she knew that she was suddenly sounding stiff and formal but she couldn't help it. 'You said it yourself. You get the gremlins out of your system, Dr Ashton, but you need to do it alone.'

It was a weird, almost out-of-body experience. He swam the length of Coogee Bay and back again, twice, then a third time for good measure. Up on the beach Maggie was wrapped in what looked like an enormous beach towel—bright blue with yellow

splodges. She was sitting on the sand, chatting to the lifesavers, watching him.

He was too far away to see their faces, to have any idea what they were saying, but they looked cheerful. Maggie was waving an expansive arm in his direction. Was she talking about him?

Did it matter?

Maybe it did—but that thought wasn't going anywhere. He put his head down and swam some more.

He'd checked on her. She was obviously coping splendidly by herself. There was no need for him to have come.

There was no need for him to stay.

So finally he surfed to shore and strolled up the beach. Maggie was laughing at something the lifesavers were saying and they were laughing back. They seemed at ease together, like old friends, but then he got close enough to watch the guys' faces and he knew that, pregnancy or not, they were totally aware that this was one attractive woman.

Was he jealous?

Yes, he conceded. Yes, he was, which just went to show how dumb this whole set up was.

Get out of here, he told himself. Get out of here fast. But then Maggie rose to greet him and he stopped thinking about anything but Maggie.

Her towel was amazing. It was vast, sky blue and dotted with brilliant yellow sunflowers. Draped around her very pregnant body she looked…she looked…

'Like an elephant,' she said before he said a word, and he blinked.

'Pardon?'

'That's what these guys here say I resemble. An elephant with sunflowers. Elegance-R-Us.'

'You look cute,' he said lamely, and the lifesavers looked at him like he was a sandwich short of a picnic. Which maybe he was. Cute didn't cut it.

Sexy did, though.

'I don't think anything this big can be classified as cute,' Maggie retorted. 'But I'm going for whale rather than the elephant. A cute little sexy mama whale. You say I'm cute? The guys here say I'm sexy. I say I'm just enormous.' She twirled

around, full circle, grinned and unwrapped herself, then proffered her towel. ‘Meanwhile, would you like to borrow this? You need to dry yourself or you’ll get cold.’ And before he could stop her she’d handed her over her sunflowers.

He was dripping. He had no other towel, so it’d be churlish to refuse.

But her towel smelled of her. There it was again, that faint citrusy thing, mixed now with the salt from the sea. She must use it in her washing powder, he thought. Or maybe it was just Maggie. Maggie exuding lemons and limes, tangy, clean and beautiful.

She was smiling happily at him as if she was really pleased he’d dropped by, and she was really pleased that he’d seemed to enjoy the swim she’d persuaded him to take.

Yep, beautiful. And sexy. And cute. The whole lot wrapped together.

But she was reaching into her bag, fetching out a sarong and wrapping it round herself. Sliding her toes into sandals. Preparing to leave.

‘That was wonderful,’ she said. ‘It was great to see you again, Max, but it is getting cold. Thank you for coming. Goodbye.’

So there it was. He’d been dismissed. His duty was done; he could leave.

‘You’re not going to ask me back to your place for a drink?’ he said before he could stop himself, and she looked him up and down, appraisingly.

‘Risky,’ she said.

‘Risky why?’

‘You know why.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ he said. ‘And I’d rather not drive back to my place covered in sand. Your apartment’s just over the road. It was your concierge who told me where to find you.’

That was what his mouth was saying. Was he out of his mind? He needed to leave, yet here he was, arguing.

Something was driving his tongue that wasn’t his head.

‘You’d be second in line to the shower,’ she said cautiously. ‘It’s my shower. I get to go first.’

‘Deal,’ he said, and that was that. The lifesavers looked almost disappointed as Maggie turned to them and waved.

‘See you tomorrow, Craig, Simon,’ she said happily.

‘Unless you’re in hospital tomorrow,’ one of the men said, and for a moment a shadow flitted across Maggie’s face.

Was she worried about it, then? The birth?

Of course she would be. How many pregnant women had Max cared for? Every single one of them worried.

But Maggie was putting on a cheerful front and he watched her deliberately put the shadows aside. ‘I’m not due for a week,’ she told them. ‘And first babies are always late. I’m guessing there’s two more swimming weeks to go.’

‘Well, good luck if there’s not,’ the same guy said. ‘And let us know what happens. We’re starting to feel like we know your daughter already.’

They walked up the beach together, slowly. Max had tugged on his clothes but he still felt…different.

Maggie had introduced the lifesavers to her daughter. She’d made them her friends. This woman could make friends with anyone.

She was beautiful. The word was echoing over and over in his mind. She had the sunflowers draped over her shoulders. She was a huge blue and yellow whale.

Gorgeous!

‘I wouldn’t mind an ice cream,’ she ventured as they neared the street, so Max bought two ice creams and in silent consent they sat on a park bench and ate them.

She was a very neat ice-cream eater, Max noted. Methodical. Cute.

‘And you’re a biter,’ Maggie told him, and he stared.

‘Pardon?’

‘You bite your ice cream. I’ve never been able to figure why people do that. You risk freezing your insides. Licking’s much more sensible.’

‘How did you know what I was thinking?’

‘I just know,’ she said smugly and then relented as she saw his look of bewilderment. ‘You have a very readable face.’

‘Gee, thanks.’

‘My pleasure. I practise reading people’s faces,’ she explained. ‘So much more dependable than palm-reading—and I like doing

it.'

'I don't like you doing it.'

'Whatever,' she said happily. 'But biting ice-cream cones is nuts. You've finished already, and mine's only quarter way down. So…do you always take your pleasures this fast?'

She eyed him sideways, her eyes twinkling, deliberately appraising, deliberately teasing, and he felt himself respond—maybe exactly how she hoped he'd respond. Trying not to blush like a schoolboy!

First the boxers, now this. She was enjoying herself at his expense.

He'd found her expecting her to be lonely, maybe anxious, maybe depressed. Maybe she was all those things, but she was making a good job of hiding it.

'When did you last have an antenatal check?' he demanded, trying to get back to sounding businesslike, but instead sounding like he was feeling, out of his depth and flailing.

'Yesterday—*Doctor*,' she said, raising her brows, still laughing. Still teasing. 'I'm being *very* good.'

She had him off balance and she knew it. All he could do was flounder on. 'So what did he say?'

'*She*. A lovely obstetrician called Helen.' She says my baby's head's not engaged yet so I could be at least a week.'

'So what are you doing with yourself?'

'Reading,' she said, and looked virtuous. 'Reading, reading, reading. And no—*Doctor*—not a romance or a thriller or even a trashy magazine. Medical journals. If I'm going to be a family doctor I'm going to be a good one. Did you know bed bugs are on the rise?'

'Bed bugs,' he said faintly.

'World travel's getting so common that the little pests are spreading,' she said. 'Apparently, if a patient comes in covered in red welts I should check if they've been in a hotel recently. And if a local hotel gets infected then there's a whole list of things that need to be done. I've been reading Health Department Guidelines. As district medical officer—that's me now—I need to know what to look for. Did you know they hide in the seams of mattresses during the day? And you can't just spray the place with an insecticide bomb and move on either. There's serious health implications. I need to know what to do—and I get to

close the place down if they won't comply.'

'Really,' he said faintly.

'Really,' she said, sounding reproving. 'And don't sound dismissive. You get bitten by bed bugs and you'll be the first to complain to the local health officer. There's so much to learn.'

'I see there is.'

'Don't belittle it,' she said, even more reproving, and stood up. He looked up at her—wrapped in her sarong and towel, balancing her ice-cream cone—and thought there was no way he could belittle this woman.

And suddenly the focus was no longer on bed bugs. Or ice creams. Or even mischief and teasing. Suddenly he didn't know where to go from here.

'Look, I'd better go,' she said, as he rose to stand beside her. 'That shower… Maybe it's not a good idea.'

'Maybe it's not.' What was going on here?

But he knew. What he was feeling was an irresistible attraction to a woman who represented everything he didn't want. Commitment. Giving himself. Emotional entanglement.

Everything he didn't want?

How many doctors did he know that'd take bed bugs on as a commitment? But he knew that Maggie would take on everything she cared about as a commitment.

The farm. Angus. The community of Yandilagong.

Him?

See, there it was. He looked down into her eyes and thought he could read her. If he wanted her…

He did want her.

No. To leap into that abyss…

'Maggie…'

'No,' she said softly. 'You don't really want…what's between us. Not now, maybe not ever. It's better you go.'

'John wants me to keep checking.'

'You can ring me at the hotel. John can ring himself if he wants. Come to think of it, he does already, so you needn't bother.'

'Is there anything at all that you need?'

'No.'

'So that's it, then.'

‘Yes,’ she said, and turned away.

And then…

They were standing near where pedestrians were streaming over the road from the beach-side park to the shops beyond.

The traffic lights across to the shops didn’t appear to be working. At some subconscious level while they’d been eating their ice creams Max had been conscious of confusion, cars slowing, honking at each other, pedestrians scurrying between cars.

The car came from nowhere, overtaking others that had slowed to a crawl. Its tyres were screeching into acceleration where others were braking. It was bearing straight down on the intersection like there was no question it had right of way. It was travelling way beyond the speed limit, a crazy speed, even if people weren’t there.

Only, of course, people were there. Families were leaving the park. Tourists were holding ice creams and cameras, chatting to each other as they headed to the shops. A couple of office workers, their suits at odds with the casual crowd, looked like they were heading home. A young mother was pushing a stroller.

All were frozen by the noise of a car out of control.

There was no time for screaming. Just the roar of the car’s engine.

It didn’t even slow. It came straight through.

There was a flash of yellow, a sickening thump, a crash of breaking glass. A body flew high, above the car’s bonnet. All the way over.

It crumpled to nothing on the road behind.

The car didn’t pause; indeed, the scream of its engine increased. The bright yellow motor with huge wheels and about a dozen exhaust pipes behind simply kept right on accelerating, screaming along the esplanade, through the next set of lights—also not lit—around the corner, up the hill and out of sight.

Leaving behind mayhem.

CHAPTER EIGHT

For a moment nobody moved. It was like some sort of Greek tragedy—players turned to statues where they stood.

Then someone screamed, and Max was gone from Maggie's side in an instant.

She hardly saw him go. He was simply no longer with her, and by the time she could take in the enormity of what had happened—what was still happening—he was crouching by a body crumpled on the roadway.

Dear God, it was a child.

She dropped her ice cream and her bag and ran.

Triage. Max was with the child. What else?

No one else seemed to have been hit. Or maybe there had.

Yes, there was another. A woman was standing in the middle of the road, behind a stroller, staring numbly at the child who was now more than ten yards away from her.

Maggie's eyes dropped from her face and saw her arm, which was streaming with blood. Far, far too much blood.

Maggie was with her in a heartbeat, seizing her hand and raising it above her head.

'Sit,' she said, and the woman looked wildly toward the child Max was tending.

'No. I…'

'Help me,' Maggie said harshly to a kid standing by—a teenager with green-spiked hair and a T-shirt with a message that was shocking. If she was in the mood to be shocked. She wasn't.

'Give me your shirt,' she said, and to the kid's enormous credit he peeled it off almost before she'd finished saying the words.

'Help me sit her down,' she said, and the kid took the woman's good hand and Maggie gently pressured the woman to sit. And then, as she sagged, to lie down.

Her arm was gushing, blood pumping out at a rate that was terrifying. Maggie had it still in the air. She grasped one of the

kid's hands and placed it on the woman's wrist so he was holding her arm up. 'Hold it high,' she snapped, 'Keep it there.' She was twisting his T-shirt into a tie, twisting, twisting.

'Grace…' the woman managed.

'I'm a doctor,' Maggie said as she wound the T-shirt round her upper arm. 'There's two of us here. Dr Ashton's looking after Grace while I look after you. I need to stop your arm bleeding before you can go to her.'

It sounded simple. Stop the bleeding. Stopping a gushing artery was an almost impossible ask.

She'd do it. She had the twirled T-shirt right round the woman's arm now and was twisting it cruelly. The woman cried out in pain.

'Ambulance!'

To Maggie's astonishment—and relief—the kid—Spike?—was holding his cellphone with his spare hand, barking orders. The kid looked all of about fifteen, yet he was acting with the responsibility of a trained paramedic. 'Esplanade, Coogee. Traffic accident. Two hurt, bad. Bleeding all over the place. Get here fast!'

'I'm going to be sick,' someone moaned faintly behind them. The kid turned and snapped, 'Get away from us before you do, then. And give us your cardigan. We need a pillow.'

'Great,' she said, as someone else handed over a jacket—not the woman who was threatening to vomit but it didn't matter who gave it, as long as they had it. 'Keep that hand raised.'

'Got it,' the kid said—and not for the first time Maggie thought how impossible it was to predict from any group of people who could be called on to help.

Who was helping Max?

Did he need her?

She couldn't look. Not yet.

The bleeding was slowing. Thank God. Heaven only knew how much blood the woman had lost in those first seconds—her arm had been ripped almost from elbow to wrist and spilled blood was impossible to quantify—but the bleeding was easing now to almost nothing.

'I need another shirt,' she yelled back into the crowd, and someone handed one over. 'And a towel.' She'd dropped hers and

there was no time to return to the side of the road to fetch it. But someone handed one over.

In seconds she'd fashioned a pad to fit over the whole wound. She placed it on, then wrapped it tightly with the shirt, using the sleeves to tie and tie again.

She now had a tourniquet and pressure on the wound itself, and Spike was still holding the arm high.

'Grace,' the woman moaned again, and finally Maggie let herself glance across to Max.

He was working furiously. Alone. No one had moved to help him. There was a gathering crowd of onlookers but that was all they were. Onlookers.

She had Spike to help her, and the woman's bleeding was controlled. Triage said she had to move on.

'Can you tell me your name?' she asked, and the woman's pain-filled eyes stared up at her like she didn't hear.

'Your name,' she said again, softly but urgently, and put her hand fleetingly on her cheek. 'It's okay. Spike and I have stopped your arm bleeding. You're going to be okay. But I need your name.'

'J-Judith.'

'The little girl—she's yours?'

'I… Yes. Thomas is in the stroller. Grace is…Grace is…'

'Dr Ashton's looking after Grace,' Maggie told her. 'He's good. He'll take good care of her. I'll go now and see how she is.'

'Thomas…'

'Thomas is fine.' She looked around her at the onlookers. Met the eye of an elderly woman who was looking shocked, but was already turning away as if she was about to leave. That was what sensible people did at the scene of an accident. If they couldn't help, they left.

She wanted sensible.

'Can you help with the baby in the stroller?' she called and the woman paused and pointed to herself.

'Me?'

'Please. What's your name?'

'Mary. I know these people,' she ventured. 'They live near me.'

'Great.' She motioned her to come close, so Judith could see how comfortingly grandmotherly she looked. 'Judith, Mary's one of your neighbours and she'll be looking after Thomas. Spike

here is holding your arm up until the ambulance arrives, so it doesn't start bleeding again. You're going to be fine. I need to help Dr Ashton with Grace. If you promise to stay still then there'll be two doctors looking after Grace.'

'Go,' the woman whispered without hesitation. 'Go.'

He heard her in the background and he blessed her for it. He'd never questioned her competence, but now… She was skilled and she was fast and she was sure. People jumped when she said jump, recognising her natural authority even if she was nine months pregnant, covered with sand and dressed in a bright yellow sarong.

There was so much blood… The woman Maggie was working on must have torn an artery but he couldn't help her. He had urgent work to do himself.

Vaguely he heard the voices in the background, the woman's voice naming her children. The blonde-ringletted child under his hands was dressed endearingly in a pink tutu over a bathing costume stained with rainbow ice cream. She was called Grace?

She was conscious. Just. Considering the force with which she'd hit the road, consciousness was a miracle. But like her mother, there was far too much blood. From her leg. Torn femoral artery? It must be.

He'd ripped his shirt—he was getting good at this! —and was twisting a tourniquet. Slowing the bleeding. Her leg was twisted at an appalling angle. There was a gash across her abdomen, bleeding sluggishly, and the bitumen had ripped her skin like sandpaper. Her tutu was bright with blood.

'It's okay, sweetheart,' he murmured as he worked, and she gazed up at him in pain and confusion and shock. 'It's okay. The car hurt your leg. I'm a doctor and I need to fix it.'

'M-Mummy…'

And then her eyes rolled back in her head. Her tiny body was suddenly limp.

No!

Blood loss. Haemorrhagic shock.

He dropped the shirt-cum-tourniquet he was working on and moved to cup her face in his hands. Breathed. Hit her chest.

Her leg started spurting blood again.

But suddenly Maggie was beside him, kneeling on the bitumen, taking in the situation in one sweeping glance.

'I'll stop the bleeding, you get her breathing,' she muttered. 'Go.'

He had help!

It was blood loss—lack of blood pressure—that'd caused her heart to stop. He knew that. He had to get her breathing. But it was no use getting her heart to work again if the blood loss didn't stop. The task was impossible.

But with Maggie beside him he no longer had to think about the bleeding. He could move to CPR as he'd practised it so many times, at medical school and afterwards.

Breathe, one, two, three…

Breathe, one, two, three…

'The ambulance is on its way,' Maggie snapped as she worked, and he glanced across to where a kid with spiked hair was supporting the mother. So did Maggie.

The kid gave Maggie a thumbs-up sign, and she turned back and kept on working.

Breathe, one, two, three…

'I'm shifting this leg,' she said. 'The compound fracture means we'll never stop the bleeding while the artery's this exposed.' But she hadn't stopped to speak. She was simply doing. She was twisting the shirt-tourniquet one last time, holding it in her teeth —in her teeth!—taking the leg in both hands…

One fast movement and the leg was suddenly in alignment.

Not that Max had time to care.

Breathe, one, two, three…

Please.

Breathe, one, two, three…

And the little girl's chest heaved. Heaved again, all by itself.

'Dear God,' Maggie whispered, and Max was saying it too, over and over in his head.

Please, please, please…

The child was breathing.

The bleeding was slowing again now, but not because of death. Not!

'The ambulance,' Maggie whispered, and he heard it then, the scream of the siren above the traffic. Help was on its way.

Plasma. IV fluids for both mother and daughter. If they could get them on board before the little girl's heart shut down again, she stood a chance.

And then the professionals were there. There were suddenly four skilled paramedics, assessing in an instant what Max and Maggie were doing, skilled hands taking over, smoothly, efficiently.

IV lines were going in. Oxygen masks. Pain relief.

Stabilisation, stretcher boards, transfer.

Curt questions, to the point, to each of them. Who was involved? The blood…was any of it Maggie's? Max's? Spike's?

The baby in the stroller… Identification?

'I know who they are,' Mary said. The elderly lady had lifted the toddler from the pram and was cuddling him. 'If you want, I'll come to the hospital and hold the baby until someone can come for him. I can give you details.'

'And you?' The ambulance officer turned to Maggie. 'Do you need help?'

'I'm f-fine,' she managed, knowing she didn't look fine. Nine months pregnant, soaked in blood, shocked.

'I'll look after her,' Max said, and his arm came round her waist and she let herself lean into him.

'I feel funny,' Spike said suddenly, and there was another moment of drama where the paramedic moved fast before the kid's knees buckled under him.

'He's a hero,' Maggie said shakily as they loaded Spike, too, into the ambulance and the paramedic looked at her and then at Max.

'It seems we have a surfeit,' he said dryly. 'We were lucky to get here as fast as we did—the power's off all over the city and the traffic's crazy. But in the meantime you guys seem to have saved a couple of lives.'

And then they were gone.

The police were taking statements and were collecting fragments of broken glass for forensics. Someone had started cleaning blood from the road.

In a few minutes all evidence of the accident would have disappeared. The stone had been tossed into the lake, it had splashed, the ripples were moving outward and in minutes life

would be smooth again. Only Maggie didn't look the least bit smooth.

'Maggie, you know we agreed that shower wasn't a good idea?' Max murmured, and she looked up him and he saw her react to what he must look like. Which was a reflection of what she looked like.

Texas Chainsaw Massacre, version two.

'I'm not sure they'll even let us into the apartment block now,' she muttered, and her voice was shaky.

'You should have gone with the ambulance.'

'Why? My voice always shakes after drama. I'm fine.' She shook her head. 'Of all the criminal…'

'Don't think about it. Come and get clean.'

'You'll talk your way past my concierge?'

'I'll do whatever I must to get this off us,' he muttered grimly. 'But we did good, Maggie.'

'We did, didn't we?' she said—and burst into tears.

She sobbed. She sobbed all the way back to the apartment, while Max told a stunned concierge what had happened. The power was out and the reception area was dim. 'There's been power outages a couple of times already this week,' a shocked concierge told them as he ushered them toward the stairs. 'That'll be what happened with the traffic lights.'

Maggie was no longer listening. She was simply limp.

What was wrong with her? She'd done her share of stints in emergency rooms. She was a doctor, for heaven's sake. What was she doing, collapsing like a sodden rag?

But collapse she had. She couldn't stop shaking. If Max hadn't been holding her up she'd simply have sat where she was and not moved until morning.

Her tears had stopped—finally—but the numbness was ongoing. She made no protest as Max propelled her into her apartment, into the bathroom and straight into the shower. Then, as she stood limply under the warm water, sagging against the far wall, he swore, pulled his shoes off and came into the shower with her. He tugged her close and held her while the water ran and ran, and the red slowly turned to pink and then slowly

turned clear.

Max had ripped off the remains of his ruined shirt along with his shoes. He was wearing chinos and nothing else. She was wearing her sarong. It might be clean but it still felt bloody. Ugh. She didn't want it on. She hauled it free and the water turned red again with the movement.

There was a crimson smear on her bikini top. She tugged at the strap and Max hesitated, then helped her unfasten it.

Then, as the shaking continued, as her bikini top fell to the floor, he swore and tugged her in hard against him.

What was she doing? She didn't care. She didn't have the energy to care. She let herself be pressed to Max's bare chest, skin against skin.

She needed the contact so much. She needed him.

And something else.

She wanted to be beautiful for him, she thought through a haze of shock and tears. It was a silly, dumb thing to think but think it she did.

She wanted *him*.

'Maggie…'

His voice was unsteady.

'S-sorry,' she whispered, trying to get her voice under control. Trying to figure out what on earth she was thinking. 'I'm sorry. I… It's just… It must be being nine months pregnant. Hormones or something. I'm not… It's not exactly medical treatment you're giving me here.'

'I'm trying hard to feel like your treating doctor,' he said, and she felt a fierce stab of denial. No.

'You don't feel like my treating doctor,' she whispered.

The warm water was running over them. There was no light apart from the filtered daylight from the window in the bedroom beyond. She felt like she was in a warm, sheltering cave, held by her man.

She was so close…

Closer than she'd felt to William?

That was an impossible question, and the truth was she didn't know. But it didn't seem to matter.

Up until now, grief had been with her every time she thought of him. Now, shocked out of any trace of a comfort zone, thrown into such intimacy with this new man in her life, it seemed that

William had become a memory that couldn't be betrayed, a gentle ghost taking his rightful place in her life, watching her move on.

And with the thought—move on—came knowledge of where her heart was taking her, and the surge of self-knowledge made her gasp.

She made to pull away but Max was holding her against his chest. Against his heart.

Her bump was in the way. Apart from her tiny bikini bottom she was totally naked, but she was still huge. But Max was holding her as if he loved her; as if this child she was carrying was his.

No. He didn't want this. How could he?

'You don't want this,' she whispered.

'Want what, Maggie?'

What did she want?

She knew exactly what she wanted. The unsayable. But she had to figure another answer.

'You don't want a pregnant woman stark naked against you.'

'I don't believe you're quite stark naked.'

'I might as well be. And I'm so…so…'

'Beautiful,' he said softly. And then as she looked up at him in confusion, he added, almost ruefully, 'Pregnancy's beautiful. I've seen this before, Maggie. I'm a doctor, remember.'

That got to her. No way was she going down that route. She pulled back from him, swiped water out of her eyes, tried to look up at him with determination. 'You're not *my* doctor.'

'You needed someone. You sobbed.'

'I didn't need a doctor,' she managed. 'I needed someone who knew what I was feeling. Didn't you feel like sobbing, too?'

He wasn't answering. He was fighting to act as if this was professional care.

She didn't want to be treated with professional care.

Why had she let herself sob on him? What sort of a baby was she?

Enough. She hauled open the shower and grabbed a towel. It was big but not big enough. Beautiful? Ha! Winding the towel round her as best she could, she backed into the bedroom, leaving Max looking after her.

Still not answering.

She'd fallen in love, she admitted as she towelled herself dry with grim intensity. With someone who saw her as a patient.

So get dressed. Get this finished with. Fast.

How had that happened?

Maggie had been covered with blood and she'd been distressed. She'd needed to get her clothes off. It was natural that he'd help her.

So? He was a doctor helping a heavily pregnant woman in distress. He should feel professionally detached.

He felt no such thing.

She'd asked him if he felt like sobbing. The answer to that was easy. The way he'd felt…sobbing didn't come close.

But what he was feeling was nuts. To look at a nine-months-pregnant woman and ache to take her to him…

It was inappropriate. It was mixed up with his memories of Alice.

If she wasn't pregnant, would he still feel this desire?

He needed to get away, he thought, until after Maggie's baby was born. Until he could see how much he wanted Maggie for herself.

He suspected it was a lot.

So don't rush it, he told himself harshly. Leave her until you can see the whole picture. Get the emotion of pregnancy out of it.

Meanwhile, she didn't need him.

But, damn it, he wanted her to need him.

There wasn't even a light in this apartment. There'd been a couple of weeks of rolling power cuts—apparently there was a major problem with the city grid. If he wasn't here she'd be by herself in the dark.

Maybe she had enough resourcefulness to buy herself a candle?

Of course she did, he thought, hauling off his soaking chinos and wrapping himself in a towel. It might be seductive to think of himself as a white knight on a charger, but she didn't want that.

And maybe playing the protector now might mess with things later.

How much later?

Later she'd have a baby and a farm and friends. She still wouldn't need him.

He came out of the bathroom and she was at the apartment door. Thanking the concierge. Not being needy at all.

'They'll get him home. Great.'

She turned and he copped another blast of how gorgeous she was. Her hair was still wet, her flaming curls clinging to her lovely face. She was standing in bare feet, wearing maternity smock and jeans, lit by the afternoon sun from the outside window. And as he watched her, the tangle of emotions surrounding him fell away. Hunger hit him with such force that he almost took her in his arms right then.

But she was holding out gym pants, measuring them for length. The gym pants acted like a shield, giving him pause.

Somehow sense prevailed. Just.

'I've found you some clothes,' she said, cutting across his thoughts with such brisk efficiency that he blinked.

'Pardon?'

'Don—the concierge—has loaned you his gym gear. You need to bring it back tomorrow. Clean.'

'Um…thanks,' he said. Resourceful? Yes, she was. Clinging? No.

'You can hardly drive home in your towel,' she explained, quite kindly. 'We both need to get a bit of dignity back here.'

'We do.'

'Right, then,' she said, and waited—politely—for him to disappear back into the bathroom. To get into another man's gym gear and leave.

What else was a man to do?

Take her in his arms and kiss her senseless?

Let himself fall into that abyss?

He was so close—but not close enough. For as she turned away, he saw her put a hand to her back and wince. Backache in advanced pregnancy was common, but with that tiny gesture the pain he'd felt on losing Alice came flooding back. Maggie was beautiful, brave, intelligent—and vulnerable and pregnant and

alive. How would he feel if he took her to him, if he loved her with all his heart and then…and then…?

No.

And she'd turned away. She was being sensible for them both.

By the time he was dressed in Don's classy gym gear he was almost thinking clearly, but still he didn't want to leave her. What had happened seemed too big. Outside, the sun had gone behind clouds and the apartment was gloomy.

'Do you have candles?' he asked, and she looked at him like he wasn't very bright.

'Of course I have candles. I have enough to light the whole apartment. We had power cuts for a while last night, too, if you remember, and the night before that. Did the lights go off where you were?'

'No.' But maybe they had. The hospital had its own generator and by the time he'd left work—at midnight—the power had been on again.

Work. That was the way to go, he thought. Get back to work and get a grip on your emotions. But to leave her here alone seemed wrong.

But maybe there was an alternative.

'I do need to go back to work,' he told her. 'But I also want to check on Judith and Grace. The ambulance was taking them to Sydney South. Would you like to come with me? I can put you in a cab to come home afterwards.'

'Thank you,' she said, picking up her purse.

Just like that. 'Yes?'

'I'd decided I'd go before you offered,' she admitted. 'I know I should be professionally detached, but you're looking at a woman who's so undetached she just sobbed her naked heart out on your manly chest. And you know something? I might have sobbed even if it wasn't manly so let's not get too personal here. So, yes, please, Dr Ashton, I need to find out how they are.'

'You should rest,' he said, belatedly.

'So I should,' she agreed. 'But I'm never going to rest until I know.'

'Maggie…'

'No more sobbing,' she promised. 'No more chests. Just two

doctors checking on two patients. Let's go.'

CHAPTER NINE

So once again Maggie got to ride in his seriously sexy little car, but despite her bravado she wasn't feeling sexy, or brave, or anything other than totally disoriented. She was feeling disconcerted by the way she'd reacted over the last couple of hours. She was feeling…bereft.

Because she wanted this to be different?

For her mind had moved on from drama and was now playing tricks. Max was driving her to the hospital to see how two people they'd helped were faring. That was all that was happening but she was feeling sensation of warm wind in her hair, she was watching Max's strongly boned hands—surgeon's hands, she thought—on the steering-wheel, and she was feeling like she was part of a couple again. She felt cared for. She felt like she was a woman beside the man she loved.

The sensation was insidious in its sweetness—and it was a lie.

For Max was being efficient and kind. Nothing else.

But it didn't stop her soaking it up. True or not, she was holding to the moment, thinking if this was all she had then she'd enjoy every minute of it.

But sadly it was only a short drive. At the hospital Max pulled into his personal parking place—impressive!-and her illusion of togetherness dispersed. It was back to being Maggie on her own.

But still she hesitated before getting out of his car, holding back for just a moment but long enough for him to come round to her side. He was holding the door wide for her, looking at her in concern. Proffering his hands to help tug her unwieldy body upward.

'Are you okay?' he asked uneasily. 'Maggie, this is too much. Shall I take you home again?'

'I'm fine. It's just this car's too low. I need a crane.' She looked at his hands—thought about how she should refuse his aid. Contact with this man was doing dumb things to her head—and

then she thought, no, dumb or not she'd take any contact she could get. She took his hands, he tugged her to her feet and she came too fast.

She was hard against him. Only she wasn't. Her bump was in the way.

She had to get herself under control. Max was on the other side of her bump, holding on, waiting for her to steady herself. Looking at her in concern.

She steadied. Took a deep breath. Tugged her hands away.

Then… 'Spike,' she said.

This was exactly what she needed. Not to look at Max. Not to let him see her need. Spike was on the far side of the car park, accompanied by a couple—a man in paint-spattered overalls and a woman in the uniform of one of the local supermarket chains. They looked about to climb into a battered family sedan.

'Spike,' Maggie yelled, and then, as he didn't respond, she put two fingers in her mouth and whistled.

Max hadn't seen Spike, and he hadn't expected it. He was a whole eighteen inches away from Maggie, and the whistle came close to bursting his eardrums. It was a whistle a farmer might use to call a dog in the next county.

'It's Spike,' Maggie said happily, and headed across the car park.

He followed. Bemused.

'Where did you learn to whistle like that?'

'Betty,' she said over her shoulder. 'Great legacy, huh?'

Maggie had Spike's attention now. Of course she did. He—and his parents?—stood by their car, immobilised by Maggie's whistle.

The whole car-park looked immobilised by Maggie's whistle, but Maggie's sole attention was on Spike.

The kid still looked pale and subdued, dressed in the nondescript clothes that emergency departments give out after accidents. His spiked hair was sagging at the tips and he looked…smaller? But Max watched his face as he recognised Maggie, and thought this was a kid who'd had a life-or-death situation thrust at him and who'd reacted with courage and honour. It had left its mark.

Like Maggie, sobbing her heart out on his chest. Life's

tragedies were something that affected both them deeply.

'Spike,' Maggie said joyfully as she reached him, and she hugged him before he knew what had hit him.

'I'm C-Colin,' the kid managed, trying to sound defiant. 'Not Spike.'

Maggie grinned and turned to Max. 'He's Colin,' she said happily. 'Our hero's Colin.'

'Hero?' the woman beside Spike said faintly.

'Hero,' Maggie said definitely. 'Is Colin your son?'

'I… Yes,' the woman said. 'And this is his father.'

'I'm really pleased to meet you,' Maggie said warmly. 'We helped at the accident, with your wonderful son.'

'The hospital called us,' the man told them, glancing at Spike as if the thought of Colin as wonderful was clearly ludicrous. 'They said Colin had been in an accident.'

'We were so scared,' the woman added. 'Only then we found out he wasn't actually in the accident. He'd just seen it and fainted.'

Someone needed to explain, but even as Max thought it, Maggie was on the case. She was like a lioness with a cub, he thought, bemused. Maggie, fierce and loyal and true. He watched the indignation on her face and he thought this was a woman who, once she gave her heart, would give it for ever. Spike had earned her loyalty and she'd repay it a thousand times over.

And he wondered suddenly—out of left field—whether he could find the courage to ask for that commitment to himself.

'Is that what Colin told you?' she was demanding, indignation personified. 'That he'd seen an accident and fainted?'

'What else is there?' his father asked.

'Did he tell you he saved a lady's life?'

The couple stared. 'He just said he saw an accident,' Spike's mother said. 'He said he had to give his T-shirt to the doctor and the ambulance guy said he fainted.'

'Not until he wasn't needed any more,' Maggie retorted. 'Tell them, Max. This is Dr Ashton, by the way. Dr Ashton, tell them about how Colin was just plain wonderful.'

So Max told them, while Spike's parents looked bemused, and then disbelieving, and finally awed. Spike flushed and looked like he didn't know where to put himself, but he didn't have a

choice. Like it or not, Maggie hugged him again, and then his mother was lining up for her share.

And suddenly, fiercely, Max was wishing he was somewhere in the middle of that hugging. It was dumb but there it was. Things were shifting inside. A huge hunger he'd ignored for years was suddenly refusing to be ignored.

The abyss of emotional connection seemed suddenly no abyss but something wonderful. Something that if he dared move forward could be his again.

If he dared.

Maybe…maybe that abyss was simply a blockade that had to be battered down. It was a blockade built from fear and loneliness but on the other side…

'You must be so proud,' Maggie declared, as Max's world shifted, while Spike's mum took over hugging duty.

'An' the doctor said they'll live,' Colin said, muffled by the closeness of his mother. 'I asked. But I can't believe I fainted. Bloody sook.'

'You didn't faint until the drama was over,' Max said firmly, putting his arm round Maggie and holding her against him. Finally taking a hug for himself. The hug felt good. No, it felt excellent. It felt right.

But somehow he had to keep talking to Spike and his parents. Maggie expected it of him, he knew. This was a lady who'd expect a lot of her man.

'Colin, I fainted for the first time when I was a medical student,' he told him. 'It was during the first Caesarean birth I ever attended. The mother was conscious—*she* told the nurse she thought I was going to faint. She even told her to help me. Colin, you did better than the average medical student. You did what had to be done, and you kept your personal, emotional reaction until afterwards. That took guts.'

And beside him Maggie nestled closer and beamed up at him. He had her approval, he thought, and maybe what he was feeling was corny and clichéd and soppy, but corny or not it felt right.

'Did he really do that?' Spike's father demanded, staring at his son like he'd never seen him before.

'He was the only one in the crowd with the courage to help,' Maggie declared, and Max could feel her wanting to hug Spike

again. He was doing Spike a favour by holding onto her, but that certainly wasn't the reason he was holding on. He was holding on for himself alone. 'Maggie and I are trained medical professionals,' he said, hugging her tighter to solidify the 'Maggie and I' connection. 'Colin came in cold and did brilliantly.'

'Hey,' Spike's dad said, and his eyes were filling. 'Hey.'

'Weren't nuthin',' Spike said.

'It was everything,' Max said.

And then, as Spike's parents showed every sign of bursting into tears, he said farewells for both of them and dragged a reluctant Maggie away. He held onto her all the way to the other side of the car park. He'd drag her further if he could, he thought. There were far too many people around for what he wanted to do; for what he wanted to say.

But it'd have to wait. Maggie wanted to see how Grace and Judith were faring and something told him nothing would ever get in the way of Maggie's intentions.

But then he paused as he heard her sniff. 'Maggie?' He took her shoulders and looked down into her eyes. She sniffed again and glared.

'I don't cry,' she managed. 'I never cry.'

'I know that,' he said, managing to keep a straight face. 'So why are you not crying now?'

'I just thought…' She swiped her eyes angrily with the back of her hand and sniffed again. 'I watched their faces. His mum and dad's.'

'They were very proud.'

'It's what I want,' she said, and she put her hands under the bump that was her baby and tried to smile. 'You know, I was at the pictures last year. Life was grey. I was just working, just living, for me, for me, for me. William had said if ever I wanted his baby I should go ahead but there was no way I could. How could I ever have a child on my own? Only then I went to the pictures and this mum came out, arguing with her son. It was a silly, soppy picture—a romance—and she'd obviously dragged her kid there against his will. He was giving her such a hard time and she was saying leave it alone, you loved it as much as I did, and he was rolling his eyes at her, and she was saying if he didn't say something nice about it she'd make him broccoli sandwiches

for a week. And he rolled his eyes again—and then he grinned. Then he looked around to make sure no one was noticing that he'd grinned, and I thought, That's what I want.'

'You want a teenager?' he said faintly.

'Like Spike,' she said. 'All contradictions and prickles and lovely underneath.' She patted her bump with pride. 'I'm going to refuse to let her get her ears pierced. That'll be such a fight. My best friend Rachel and I pierced our ears with ice and needles when we were thirteen.'

'You didn't!'

'My mum didn't even notice,' she said, with a touch of sadness. 'She wouldn't. I didn't have that kind of a family. But Rachel's did and she swabbed us with so much disinfectant the sides of our faces were yellow for a week. Then she marched us both off to her family doctor. She and Rachel yelled at each other all the time and I loved it. I so wanted someone to yell at me.'

'You're looking forward to yelling?'

'I am,' she said, sniffing again but finally managing a watery smile. 'I'm going to be the yellingest mother.'

'Maggie…' Someone pushed past them on the path. If he didn't get her to himself right now he'd go nuts.

But she wasn't thinking about him. 'Let's go,' she said, and suddenly, unaccountably, she seemed happy. She tucked her arm into his and tugged him forward. 'Let's go find Judith and Grace and make sure what Spike said is true. I'm so in the mood for a happy ending.'

So was he. He had some figuring out to do, but suddenly so was he.

Instead of going into the emergency waiting room and asking through normal channels, because Max worked at the hospital he took her straight into the emergency room itself. He introduced Maggie to Sue-Ellen, the director of the emergency department. Sue-Ellen greeted Maggie with pleasure, eyeing her bump with friendly interest.

What Spike had told them was the truth. Judith was in Theatre, having her arm stitched. She'd been given blood and would be fine. Grace was still being stabilised. 'That compound fracture of her leg needs work. She'll need grafts for the skin on

her tummy, but every indicator is that we'll have a good result,' Sue-Ellen told them. And then, as if unable to contain her curiosity, she said, 'So you're the lady Max collided with the weekend of the music festival. We've been hearing rumours.' She grinned at the bump. 'I'll assume this isn't fast work, then, Dr Ashton.'

'Sue…'

'Just kidding,' she said, and gripped Maggie's hand. 'Good to meet you, Maggie. But you don't look like you should be here as a doctor. Midwifery's that-a-way.'

'There's a while to go yet,' Maggie said, and Sue-Ellen looked at her bump more closely and raised her eyebrows in polite disagreement.

'Really? I've had ladies come in looking smaller than you and leaving with a carry cot not all that many hours later.'

'Not me,' Maggie said firmly. 'Not yet. I'm not sticking round here now. I only wanted to know how Judith and Grace are.'

'You know, they're probably better than Judith's husband,' Sue-Ellen told her, and motioned through the glass doors to where a young man sat in the waiting room. He was holding a baby—Thomas? Thomas was asleep in his arms. The young father was staring straight ahead, holding the baby like his life depended on it. He looked grey.

'He came in looking worse than he looks now,' Sue-Ellen said sympathetically. 'I think he'll have lost ten years of his life on the way here.'

'That's the downside of loving,' Max said, flinching as he watched him, and Maggie cast him a look of reproach.

'Don't,' she said softly. 'You can't keep thinking like that.'

'How can you stop?'

'You're not cut out to be an emergency physician, then,' Sue-Ellen said bluntly. 'Sometimes I wonder how on earth can I go home at night expecting Bill and the kids to still be there. But amazingly they are. You just have to keep faith.' She smiled and motioned to Maggie's bump. 'Like you. There's a mound of hope if ever I saw it. Good luck with it. Oh, and, Max, Anton's been looking for you. Have you had your phone turned off? There's a crisis upstairs.' She disappeared, leaving them standing by the admissions desk, expecting them to leave.

He'd have to leave. A crisis. Max swore under his breath. Of course. He'd slipped out to see Maggie during a quiet time. He'd called Anton after the accident saying he'd be longer than expected and it had still been quiet, but peace in his department never lasted long.

Anton needed him? He'd have to go. But what should he do with Maggie?

Maggie was looking through the glass doors that led into a waiting room. She'd be wanting to go and hug the young father, he thought. But then the door to the waiting room swung wide and Mary—the neighbour who'd helped at the scene—and a couple of other people arrived. Grandparents?

In moments the young father was surrounded. Others were doing the hugging, and Maggie was looking almost wistful.

'I need to go home,' she said, and suddenly he knew she was fighting not to sound forlorn.

He badly didn't want her to go back to the hotel by herself. Why had he set up his department so he was indispensable? Of all the stupid…

'If you wait until I've checked with my department I might be able to take you,' he told her, knowing already how doubtful it was that he could. And maybe she heard it in his voice.

'A cab's fine.' She was still looking through the glass. 'Oh, I wish there was something I could do.'

'You've done enough,' Max said. In truth he was having trouble pulling his attention away from the little group as well. They'd come so close to the edge…

He'd been over that edge. So had Maggie. Surely as a professional she knew she needed to protect herself.

But was it possible to protect yourself? He thought he'd built armour that was invincible. Only now… Suddenly he didn't know where that armour was.

'I'll just go talk to them before I go,' Maggie said, and her eyes were glistening again. 'But thank you, Max. I mean… just intending to visit was great. Even before the accident. It was very nice of you.'

'I'll come back to the hotel after work to make sure you're okay,' he growled.

'I'll be asleep,' she said, 'two minutes after I get home. Of

course I'm okay. There's no need to worry.'

'There is a need.' The thought of her going back to her hotel alone seemed unbearable. 'Maggie, have you arranged for anyone to be with when you go into labour?'

'I don't need anyone.'

'You do need—'

'No. I've learned not to.'

'I could—'

'No, because you don't want to,' she said bluntly. 'We both know there's stuff between us that's messing with your head.'

'Maybe my mess is getting clearer. Maybe my head is saying loud and clear that I want to help. Maggie, I want to be involved.'

That gave her pause. She gazed up at him for a long moment and then she shook her head.

'No,' she said, and he thought she was trying to sound firm for both of them. 'Not after today. I just sobbed on you, naked in the shower, and if that didn't confuse the issue then I don't know what would.' She hesitated but then her voice became more certain. 'Okay, Max, I'll be honest here and confess that right now I look at you and my knees turn to water. Now, if that's not a confession to make you run a mile I don't know what is. But I'm also thinking that maybe it's my hormones playing tricks. Would any nine-month pregnant woman be hard-wired to latch onto the first available male and cling? I've never been pregnant before. I have no idea what's hormones and what's not. I only know that this isn't the time to find out. And I also suspect you don't ever want to find out. You see that pain?'

She motioned out to the waiting room where the young father sat in a surge of hugs and tears. 'That's what I want to be part of,' she confessed. 'That's why I made the decision to have William's baby. I want to open myself up for all that again. Hurt, grief, but the joy that goes with it. That's what I want but I don't think you do.' She tried to smile, tried to make him smile with her, but he wasn't smiling. He glanced out at the little family and saw again the grief that he'd sworn never again to endure.

He turned again to Maggie and he knew he was exposed again, like it or not. But they were standing in the middle of the emergency room. The woman behind the admissions desk could probably hear them—he could practically see her ears flapping.

In another part of the hospital patients were waiting for him, and he knew they'd be urgent. How could he talk to her now?

He needed time to sort his head out. He needed time to get the words right.

All he could do now was to address immediate need. Which was to keep her safe.

'Maggie, I will not let you go back to the hotel,' he said. 'Let's find you a bed here until I can take you home.'

'Are you kidding?' she demanded, astounded. 'I'm not staying in hospital.'

'If you go into labour…'

'Then I'll come back. I'm not stupid.'

'Look,' he said, and suddenly he was in no man's land—no longer sure of anything. Reason had gone out the window. He only knew that this woman had changed his world, and to leave her now seemed physically impossible. 'Maggie, I don't know what the hell I'm feeling but I can't let you go home by yourself.'

'The reluctant martyr,' she groaned.

'What?'

And suddenly she was angry. 'How do you think this makes me feel—that you're being dragged into my life by your toenails, kicking and screaming. Butt out.'

'Maggie, I—'

'I've already confessed how I feel,' she snapped. 'How much pride have I lost? There's only one thing you can say after a confession like that and it's goodbye.'

'I don't want to say…'

'No, and neither do I,' she confessed, still furious. 'But we don't have a choice. Maybe we can think about things after the birth, after I get some normality back into my life. But not now.'

'You need help.'

'Stop it,' she said. 'Just cut it out or you'll have me agreeing with you, and how scary's that?'

'It's not in the least scary.'

'What, to have me clinging to you?'

'Maggie…'

'Stop it,' she ordered. 'Max, just cut it out and go back to your life. Please.'

'Do you really want me to?'

‘Of course I don’t, but it’s the only sensible thing to do.’

‘Do you want to be sensible?’

‘No!’ She was practically yelling at him. Patients were looking at them. Staff were looking at them. Maggie glanced around and suddenly she shrugged and a spark of mischief replaced the anger. Mischief and something more. ‘Of course I don’t want to be sensible, but I do need to go home. But if you’re really intent on following… Maybe I’d better warn you what you’d be in for if you really let me need you. Let’s see me not be sensible.’

And before he knew what she intended—before he could begin to guess—she seized his shoulders, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

And this was a *Kiss*. It was a seize the day, claim the man, take what you want for there might be no tomorrow kind of kiss, and it possessed him utterly, from the time her hands grasped his shoulders, from the time her lips met his, from the time she melted into him.

For that was what she did. She melted. Her lips were like fire, and the heat she gave him, the strength, the passion, the surety… It took his breath away.

It took him away. His sensible self. The Max who thought things out logically. The Max who thought he was in control.

This was a man and a woman, and between them was a need as primitive as time itself.

He was holding her close and he was falling…falling… For it was no longer Maggie who was doing the kissing. He was kissing her, holding her, taking her to him. Claiming her as his own.

And they were being cheered.

At a subconscious level he heard the cheers and knew he should pull away, only that would mean letting her go, and to let her go was impossible.

He’d never felt such heat. Never felt such fire.

Her mouth was open under his and he felt her tongue start its own sweet exploration. His hands tugged her closer and he kissed her back, demanding as well as giving, taking passion, taking sweetness and heat, taking joy…

The clapping and laughter around them was growing louder. More raucous.

And then there was an apologetic murmur. A hand on his

shoulder was tugging him back. There was laughter right beside him, and the hand on his shoulder was insistent. Someone—not Maggie—was determined that he move.

Reluctantly he propelled Maggie away from him, holding her by her shoulders until she was steady. She stood back, looking astonished at her own temerity, while around them patients and staff erupted into applause. The guy at his shoulder was an orderly at the head of a trolley, wanting to get past. The patient on the trolley was laughing, too, but the orderly was inexorably pushing them both aside.

'Bedrooms are upstairs, mate,' he said, smiling.

'It's young love,' an old lady on a nearby examination table said.

'At it like rabbits,' a kid on a trolley called out, and Max found himself blushing from the toes up.

'I just rang Anton and told him you were here,' Sue-Ellen called from behind them, apologetically. 'He needs you right away.'

And to Max's astonishment, Maggie grinned at their audience and gave Sue-Ellen a cheery wave.

'Take him,' she called. 'He's all yours now.'

'I don't think I want him,' Sue-Ellen said, grinning back. 'He's looking used.'

'If he's second hand I'll take him,' the old lady called. 'He looks like there's still a bit of life in him yet.'

'All the same—out of here,' Sue-Ellen said, laughing. 'If we can't deliver your baby, Maggie, you'll have to leave. We've got an influx expected.'

'Trouble?' Max asked, fighting hard for composure, and Sue-Ellen's smile faded.

'Probably. This power grid problem's not going away and half the city seems to be affected. The power cuts over the last few days seem to be minor in comparison. You'd think drivers would think no traffic lights means slow down. Try telling that to the moronic driver who caused your accident. We're hearing there's accidents all over the place. The only reason we're not rushed off our feet already is that the traffic's so gridlocked it's taking ages getting ambulances to us.'

And it seemed as if the outside world was breaking in from all

directions. ‘Max!’ Through the swinging doors burst Anton. ‘Where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to contact you. We’ve got a bleeder. Theatre three.’

‘Maggie, if the traffic’s a problem…’ Max started, but Maggie was already backing away.

‘It wasn’t a problem on the way in,’ Maggie said. ‘Even if it is, I’ll just find a café and sit it out until the power comes back on.’

‘I don’t want you—’

‘No,’ she said, giving a firm nod. ‘You don’t. You have work to do and I’m in the way.’

‘Max,’ Anton said, warningly. ‘This can’t wait.’

‘Goodbye Max,’ Maggie said, and tried to smile. She walked away, leaving him staring through the glass doors after her.

‘Max,’ Anton said again, sounding more urgent.

‘I’m coming.’

‘Should I find someone else?’ Anton demanded, watching his face.

‘No. No,’ he repeated, more firmly. ‘She’ll be okay. She has time.’

‘Time until the baby’s due, or time until you go after her?’ Anton said.

He didn’t answer but he didn’t have to. He knew what Maggie wanted. Her body had just told him, and he knew he wanted the same.

How soon could he go to her?

There didn’t seem to be any cabs, so Maggie took a bus, and, as Sue-Ellen had warned, the traffic was a nightmare. Every set of traffic lights was out.

The city was descending into darkness but, weirdly, people were being friendlier than she’d ever known. The lack of traffic lights, the series of mostly minor accidents at uncontrolled intersections meant that traffic was going nowhere. People sat patiently on Maggie’s bus, discussing whether the supermarkets would be open for candles, where they could get long-life milk, ice, something for dinner that didn’t need cooking.

Someone had a tiny keyring pig from a Christmas cracker that oinked every time he shone its nose light. ‘I’m going to do my supermarket shopping by pig,’ he told his fellow passengers as

after two hours on the bus everyone gave up waiting and decided the only way anyone was getting anywhere was on foot.

Maggie tried to smile. Normally she'd think this was fun, but too much had happened today and her back was starting to ache. She was still half a mile from her apartment when the bus stopped. Weariness and the shock of the day was taking its toll. She really didn't want to walk.

There were no cabs. She had no choice.

It was hard to keep herself steady on the pavement. Without streetlights, people were jostling, good-humoured and laughing, but with each step Maggie felt less like laughing. Her back hurt!

This was tiredness, she told herself. Shock. She'd been bending over the two accident victims, not being careful. She'd been swimming before that. She'd done too much.

And… She wanted Max.

Maybe she'd never see Max again.

She deserved not to see Max again, she told herself dismally. She'd kissed him like a…like a hussy.

Ooh. She gave herself a mock hoot of horror. A hussy?

She didn't feel like a hussy. She felt alone and clumsy and huge, and as she walked steadily onward she was also starting to feel more than a little scared.

A stab of hot pain jabbed at her back and she thought, no, it couldn't be. Please.

She had to be sensible. If there was a chance she was in labour… No, she was imagining things. She was over three miles from the hospital now—it was impossible to walk back. She'd be okay.

But her back hurt. A lot.

Her feet slowed. What to do?

What would she tell a patient to do?

Call an ambulance.

That was good advice. She was nine months pregnant with bad backache. Calling an ambulance was only sensible.

The decision made, she felt better. She stopped walking and searched in her purse for her phone.

It wasn't there.

Damn, she could see it, her phone, sitting on the charger on the bedside table in her apartment. She'd left it there when she'd

gone swimming and she'd been in too much of a rush when she'd left with Max to think about taking it.

Don't panic. Don't panic!

She had no phone here, but she could get to her apartment and phone from there.

She could phone Max?

Or not. What could Max do that an ambulance couldn't?

She kept walking. She could see the glimmer of the moon over the sea. The sea was where her apartment was. Great. Two minutes' walk and she'd be there. She'd let herself in, make herself a cup of tea, ring the ambulance and then watch the moonlit sea while she waited.

No power. She wouldn't be able to make tea.

Oh, for heaven's sake, she was crying again! She wasn't a hussy—she was a total wuss.

CHAPTER TEN

MAX spent the night with his thoughts returning again and again to Maggie. Uneasy, and getting worse.

As the city's traffic became more and more gridlocked, the hospital became quieter. Apparently people were abandoning their cars and walking, or finding accommodation where they could. Once the traffic was truly gridlocked, accidents lessened, and even when they happened ambulances couldn't get through the blocked roads.

'Contact your local medical centres if you need to,' radio announcers were telling those with battery-operated radios. Suburban doctors were operating emergency clinics. The population was coping as best it could.

Tomorrow there'd be questions asked in parliament, Max thought. Heads would roll over this unprecedented mess. Only…

Only Maggie.

Dammit, Maggie.

He needed to know that she'd got home safely, but he rang her apartment block between patients, at ten and again at midnight, and got no answer. He fretted about it to Anton as they worked together on what they hoped would be their last surgical case for the night, and Anton provided an answer.

'Most small apartment blocks don't man their front desks at night,' he explained patiently, as he monitored their patient's air supply. 'Phone in the morning when the concierge comes back on duty.'

'There should be an after-hours emergency number.'

'Every apartment will have its own number,' Anton said, staying patient. 'Maggie will be able to ring out if she needs to.'

'I need to ring Maggie.'

'You don't have her cellphone number?'

'No!' he snapped, so harshly the nurses looked at each other and thought whoa, tread lightly here, surgeon annoyed.

He just needed to know she'd got home. The radio was

reporting total gridlock. Even when he finished here he wouldn't be able to drive and find out.

In desperation, when he finally finished in Theatre—after two in the morning—he rang John and Margaret at the farm. Woke them. Frightened them.

For nothing.

No, Maggie's apartment number didn't work at night but if he rang in the morning the concierge would put him through. Her cellphone number? Actually, she'd given her usual phone to John because the locals used it at need. She'd said she'd buy another for private use but, no, she hadn't given them that number either.

Why hadn't they asked her for it?

Why hadn't he asked her for it?

'So what's the problem?' Margaret asked sharply.

Max caught himself and said, no, it's only that the city's in the grip of a blackout, and he was probably worrying unnecessarily.

He left the ward and walked slowly across the quadrangle to his apartment. Thanks to the hospital generators everything seemed normal. He felt stupid.

But he also felt increasingly apprehensive, and the feeling wouldn't go away.

Maggie.

This was not how it was supposed to be.

And as he stood there he thought… They were supposed to be together. One man and one woman and one baby.

The knowledge was suddenly so strong it was almost primeval, kicking in where any pretence at intelligence left off. Maggie and her baby weren't here, so why was he here?

He stopped and stared southward, toward Coogee. Three miles or so as the crow flew. How long would that take him to walk?

How long would it take him to run?

The pain wasn't too bad if she lay still.

She lay still.

The backache grew. It seemed to be coming in waves.

The apartment was dark.

She was *not* afraid of the dark.

She was afraid.

Okay, get sensible. Yes, the contractions were indeed contractions. Yes, they seemed to be getting stronger and closer together.

She rang the ambulance yet again.

'There's a massive traffic jam,' a sympathetic operator told her. 'I'm trying as hard as I can to get a car to you. Can someone take you to your local medical centre? Can you call a neighbour?'

'I'll call a neighbour,' she agreed, sweating.

She staggered up from the settee. Went to the door, unlocked it—just in case the ambulance could get here. Looked out into the pitch-black hallway.

Tried to remember seeing any of her neighbours. Tried to figure which door she could knock on.

Thought again she was being stupid.

This was her first baby. She was hours away from delivery. Maybe a day.

No, she decided as the next contraction hit. Not a day. But hopefully hours. It was stupid to stumble about in the dark waking neighbours she didn't know.

She groped her way back into her darkened living room and collapsed back onto the settee.

Dammit, she wasn't going to lie here in the dark and be terrified. She wasn't!

Max…

'Don't think of Max,' she told herself between gasps. Between contractions. 'Max has less chance of getting here than an ambulance does, so there's no use even thinking of him. Think of your daughter instead. Do you want her to meet you sweating with fear in the dark?'

'No!'

'So do something about it.

She took a deep breath, which was supposed to be steadying but wasn't. 'This isn't a scary time,' she told herself, trying hard to believe it. 'It's looking more and more like it's your daughter's birthday, so put your party hat on. When the ambulance arrives I want to look brave.'

As if…

At least light some candles.

'Okay. I think I can do that,' she gasped, clutching at her back

and trying not to cry out. ‘Maybe. If I don’t have something else happen first.’

Three miles wasn’t very long as far as marathons went, but this wasn’t a marathon, this was a sprint. Max was fit but he kept fit by working out between cases in the hospital gym. He had strength training. He didn’t run. He especially didn’t run in the dark without benefit of streetlights.

It’d be a sight easier if his heart hadn’t been hammering in his chest before he’d started. The more he ran the more it kept right on hammering.

He was being dumb, he told himself, over and over again. He was imagining problems when there weren’t any. There was no reason at all for a sane doctor to run across a darkened city, growing more fearful by the minute. But the mantra had started in his head and once started it wouldn’t go away.

Maggie, Maggie, Maggie.

He’d let her go home. Of all the stupid, criminal, irresponsible…

It wasn’t stupid, the sane part of him said. He’d assumed the electricity would come back on as it had come back on last night and the night before.

He’d never imagined this totally irrational certainty that he’d lose her.

She wasn’t his to lose, the sane portion of his brain reminded him, but the sane portion of his brain was getting smaller by the minute, replaced by raw emotion. Maggie was *his* woman. His heart was telling him that, with every sound of his feet hitting the pavement. And his woman was having his baby.

His? Irrational? Maybe but it didn’t matter. He knew truth when he heard it and he was running.

And in an apartment in Coogee… ‘I will not have my baby in the dark. I will not have my baby in fear. I will not have my baby lying on a rented hotel apartment settee with no beauty. Not!’

Her apartment block loomed solid and black in the night. There

was a faint light coming from one of the terraces above his head, but none of the windows were lit.

Maggie hadn't lit her candles, then?

Of course not. Maggie would be asleep. She wouldn't thank him for barging in and waking her. Terrifying her for nothing.

He made himself slow. Made himself catch his breath. Went into the foyer. Wondered why the door into the foyer was unlocked. Then thought maybe it was attached to some electrical security system that wasn't working. If the concierge had faced the choice of locking tenants out or letting the foyer stay unguarded overnight, that's what he would have done.

So he could climb up the stairs to Maggie's apartment.

Just walk up and knock?

That's what he was intending to do. Walk up and knock. It's three in the morning. Wake up, Maggie, I'm here.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Breathe.

Surely the books hadn't said it hurt this much.

Breathe…

You can do this.

'*I can't…*'

He knocked on the door and the impact of the knock had the door swinging inward. What the…? She hadn't locked it? She hadn't even closed it properly?

The corridor he felt his way down was in complete darkness. So was the apartment through the door. Maybe stopping to fetch a torch would have been sensible.

He wasn't feeling sensible.

He swung the door wide and called. 'Maggie?'

Nothing.

Did he stumble round in the dark and see if he could find her? Hell, he'd scare the living daylights out of her.

He raised his voice. 'Maggie?'

Still nothing.

It wasn't completely dark. There was a faint glimmer from the

hall mirror, reflecting light from outside. His eyes were finally adjusting to a darkness that was more intense here than in the moonlight outside, but it was still a less intense dark than the corridor. He could see shapes. A bench in the kitchenette. A hall lamp. The living-room settee.

'Maggie?'

He was feeling his way in, wondering if he had the right apartment. There were four doors in this corridor and he'd got here by feel.

It'd be just his luck to have the wrong apartment.

'I'm a doctor,' he called, just in case some stranger was sitting bolt upright in bed, preparing to have a heart attack because of a prowler in their apartment. 'I'm looking for Maggie. I'm looking for a pregnant woman in trouble.'

He sounded stupid, he thought, edging into the sitting room as he called.

The drapes were wide open and he could see the moonlit sea beyond. Then, as he drew further into the room, he saw there was another light source outside. Low light, hidden until now by the bulk of the settee.

He moved cautiously forward, hit his knee on a coffee table and swore.

'Maggie?' He tugged open the big glass door to see where the light from outside was coming from. 'Maggie?'

'Did you bring gas?' a voice demanded from floor level, and the words were a series of breathless, pain-filled, gasps. 'If you didn't, kill me now. Oh, Max…'

She'd set up a birth centre. She was on the tiled balcony floor but on bed of sorts, a mound of soft bedding right at the edge of the terrace, where the open protective rails gave her a sweeping vista of the sea beyond.

There were candles everywhere. She was surrounded by a sea of light, a complete circle apart from the line of sight between her and the sea. The moon was hanging low, casting a silvery trail of moonbeams over the ocean. They looked almost a ribbon, reaching out to touch the woman on the cushions at his feet.

Apart from the hush-hush of the waves on the sand below

there was complete silence. All this Max absorbed in a fraction of a second. And then…

'Mmmmmmmmmpf…'

It was a long, low moan, so low that unless he was right next to her he'd never have heard it. For Max, who'd delivered a thousand babies or so, it was the quietest birthing moan he'd ever heard.

Forget the moonbeams. He was frantically shifting candles so he could get to her. He wanted so much to take her in his arms, but there was still a part of him that was sensible. 'Obstetrician Goes Up In Flames' wasn't a headline he wanted to hit the newsstands any time soon.

Obstetrician? Maybe he was.

Indeed he was. For even as he took in what was happening, even as emotion hit him like a kick in the guts, his professional side was kicking in as well. Making him sensible; making him take the time to make the scene safe before he could kneel beside her and tug her into his arms and hold her close.

It took seconds and then he had her.

'Mmmmmmmmmmpf….'

Another contraction already…

He held her tight until it passed, and then he kept on holding her. Yes, he needed to be her doctor, but first there was an urgent need to be…Maggie's man.

'Max,' she whispered, and he simply held her until the next contraction hit and beyond. Maggie's man? Some truths were beyond question. Then…

'No gas?' she demanded.

'I didn't bring my bag,' he said ruefully. 'I ran.'

'You ran.'

'Dumb,' he said. 'Like you having your baby in the middle of a power strike. You didn't think to call for help?'

'I've called for help.'

'To me?'

'I called the ambulance. You're not an obstetrician,' she said, with a breathless attempt at dignity.

'I'm an obstetrician. Can you bear me to examine you?'

'Mmmmmmmmmpf…'

'That was a yes?'

He didn't want to be Maggie's doctor, he thought. He wanted to keep right on holding her. He also wanted a full birthing suite. A full obstetric team.

'I did call…the ambulance…' she repeated. 'Hours ago. I hoped the ambulance could get through. I didn't think you could.'

'I'd have been here earlier if you'd phoned me.'

'You want me to apologise for not phoning?' she gasped. 'You didn't bring gas. I'm holding it against you for ever. Mmmmmmmmpf…'

'I'm holding you against me for ever,' he said shakily, but he couldn't. He had to set her down again on the cushions and be her doctor.

'I'm…I think I'm going to push,' she managed.

'Try not to till I've seen.'

'Then hurry up and see,' she said, and moaned again.

'You want to yell?' he asked.

'I'll wake the neighbours.'

'Someone might have gas,' he said. 'Did you think of that? If you yelled someone might have come and helped you.'

'I only want you. Mmmmmmmmpf….'

The head…

'Maggie, she's crowning.'

'Don't care. Mmmmmmpf…'

'You do care,' he said, hauling the candles closer to where he needed to see. Then as another contraction rippled through and he realised how close she was to delivering, he suddenly changed direction, shifting candles, cushions, shoving Maggie's whole makeshift bed and Maggie with it along the balcony so she was hard against the wall. So he could haul her into sitting position and leave her propped up, gasping, fighting, bearing down, so she could see….

So she could see her daughter enter the world.

And then… There was moment's stillness. A moment's peace where the world held its breath. Where even the moonlit sea seemed to hush. Until…

She screamed, a scream to wake every neighbour from Coogee to Bondi, a truly excellent birthing scream that came with that last triumphant push.

'Slow… Slow…' he said urgently, and she did, backed off, stopped pushing, while his fingers found…cord.

Not a problem—he had it free in seconds.

Oh, thank God he was here.

'Go,' he said, and she sighed and groaned and held her knees and pushed with one mighty heave—and managed to see…

As her baby daughter slipped into Max's hands and into the world.

No one came. The scream that could have woken the dead evoked no response at all.

There was no sound at all as Max cleared the baby's airway, checked her breathing, felt this tiny, perfect being come to life in his hands. Maggie's daughter didn't cry. She simply stared upward, dazed, incredulous, vernix-coated, slippery as hell.

And inside him, something that had been missing for a long, long time settled back into his heart and stayed.

What could ever be more perfect than this? This moment of birth.

And *this* birth was the best. Delivering Maggie's baby… Quite simply he felt like the luckiest man alive, and as he slipped the tiny girl onto Maggie's breast, watched the baby slide against her mother's skin, saw Maggie's hands cradle her daughter, watched her eyes fill with tears, saw the two of them mould into one moment of absolute perfection, he knew his world could never be the same again.

He knew he could never want it to be the same.

He didn't speak. Instead he simply watched, and smiled and smiled and smiled.

Finally Maggie looked up at him, her eyes shimmering with tears, and whispered simply, 'Thank you, Max.'

'It was my privilege,' he said softly. 'I believe that I love you.'

The world held its breath once more.

She stared at him for a long moment. Awed. Then slowly the corners of her mouth curved into a smile

'It took only that,' she whispered, and the world started again. Back on the beach the waves began again, life began again. 'Oh, Max, my love. My heart.' She was smiling and smiling, her eyes misty with love and with happiness. 'For you to love me… How can you mean it?'

'I never say things I don't mean. Maggie, how can I not love

you?'

She hesitated, and he saw her smile falter. 'But…'

But? He didn't want to hear a but—and he wouldn't do anything to mess with that smile.

'Maggie, I won't rush you into anything,' he said quickly, touching her face lightly with his fingers. Wondering how this wonderful woman could possibly call him her love. Her heart. But with that one word—'*But*'—reality had broken in a little. Sense was starting to prevail.

The professional side of him was still playing a part. Right now, Maggie was at the most vulnerable moment of a woman's life. The emotion she was feeling must be overwhelming. To take her to him—to claim her as his own—was what he wanted to do more than anything in the world, but not now.

'I'll not push you further,' he whispered. 'Not this night. I swear I'll feel the same, now, tomorrow and for ever, but if it takes months for you to believe me, then so be it. I'll wait for however long it takes.'

He was watching Maggie's daughter find her breast, take her first taste of Maggie's milk. Wondering how she could doubt his love. But if Maggie needed time, he had to give it to her.

'Oh, Max, I do love you,' she whispered, and he felt the last trace of the heavy load of armour he'd placed around his heart disappear to nothing. 'My Max.'

But her instinctive *'But'* still had him shaken. It had reminded him that this was no time to demand commitment. It wasn't fair.

There was a reason laws were in place to protect the doctor-patient relationship, he thought, forcing himself to be sensible. He wasn't about to play on her gratitude and her emotions. He must hold back!

'What…what will you call her?' He was struggling hard to return to being professional—he needed to, because the birthing process wasn't quite over. But as far as Maggie was concerned it was done. Life was here now, complete. For all of them.

'Rose,' she said.

'Is that a name you and Will picked out?'

'We didn't choose,' she whispered. 'We didn't dare to think there'd ever be a baby. I did wonder about Chloe, only now I see her…she's just Rose. And I'll add an Elizabeth for Betty.' She smiled shyly up at him, looking almost anxious. 'What do you

think?'

'Pretty much perfect.'

'I think so,' she said. 'Stitches?'

'Nothing to stitch.'

'Too perfect,' she said, shy giving way to smug. She was relaxing again now, and she was looking just about as happy as it was possible for a woman to be. 'I'm so good at this.'

Right. He didn't mention the cord around Rose's neck. There were some things Maggie didn't need to know. How close she might have come…

It didn't bear thinking about.

'I'd like you up this end of the bed,' Maggie said, sounding suddenly like the old Maggie, like the strong and imperious woman he loved.

'I believe I need to clean up.'

'It can wait,' she said. 'I need to be kissed.'

So much for the doctor-patient relationship. He touched her face again, loving her with every part of his being.

He still needed to be sensible. He still needed to remember that instinctive *'But'*.

Okay, Maggie needed to see that what he was feeling wasn't the result of need and loss and all the things that had been messing with his head for so long. But right now…

'Max, right now I'm holding my daughter and I believe my world is wonderfully, amazingly fabulous,' she whispered, loving him with her smile. 'The only thing that could make it more perfect is if you kissed me. So…'

So he'd never know how she was going to finish that sentence, for he had her in his arms, her daughter gently cradled between them, and he was kissing her as she wanted to be kissed.

As he wanted to kiss her.

Which was pretty much as perfect as a kiss could be.

They slept—or Maggie and Rose slept, and Max lay with Maggie in his arms, with tiny Rose wrapped and snuggled between them.

If he slept he might move too close, put in peril this tiny, precious creature who already felt a part of him. He had her nestled between them so Maggie could feel her daughter's closeness, but Max could feel the baby's warmth as well, her tiny

snuggling movements, her flawlessness.

With the roads still blocked from the night, the usual sounds from the street below were silent. There was only the ocean, the moonlight over the water, this woman, this baby.

Life was perfect.

There were complications. He knew it. He was a surgeon in a major teaching hospital and Maggie had committed herself to be a country doctor and farmer. Were the two compatible?

Could Maggie leave Yandilagong to be with him?

The decision was too hard for now. They needed time to think.

Only there wasn't much space in his head to think. All he could think was how right Maggie felt in his arms, and how wonderful life felt right now.

Maggie stirred some time toward dawn. It was still dark. She could close her eyes and sleep again, only right now she was too happy to sleep. She felt her daughter nestled beside her. Max's arm was under her shoulders, his chest was her pillow, she was cradled against him and she felt so happy she was almost floating.

Yet she'd said, *'But.'*

Why? It had been an instinctive reaction, a stab of acknowledgement of every barrier that lay between them. *'But it's impossible that you love me.'* Only right now she couldn't even think what those barriers were.

So why had she said it?

It had changed things, she thought, no matter how he'd reassured her. She'd told him she'd loved him, but he'd moved onto practical things again. She had allowed the real world a glimpse in.

But she wanted to love him in the real world as well. She wanted to be with him. In Max's arms, with her daughter by her side, she felt like the luckiest woman in the world.

There were problems. Even within her haze of relief and love and happiness she could dimly acknowledge that. Maybe that's what her *'But'* had been about. She'd promised Betty that she'd care for Angus, she'd care for the farm, she'd even told her the medical needs of Yandilagong were settled. How could she

simply abandon that promise and walk into Max's life?

She would if he asked her. She must. She'd find a way.

Max loved her. How wonderful was that? How wonderful was life?

It was too wonderful to let herself think about problems right now, she thought dreamily. Problems were for tomorrow. Right now she was in the arms of the man she loved with all her heart, and her daughter—*their daughter?*—was between them.

She smiled a cat-got-the-cream smile and she nestled closer into Max. His arm tightened instinctively around her.

She was loved.

She slept.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Soon after the sun rose, when the power finally came on, when the city slowly came back to life, an ambulance arrived. Maggie was bundled up to be taken to hospital, so Rose could have all the checks she needed, and Maggie could be cared for.

If Maggie had her way she'd stay right where she was, but it wasn't possible. Max couldn't stay with her—or wouldn't. The impulsive declarations of the night were over.

'For we do need to take this slowly,' he told her as he helped lift them both into the back of the ambulance. 'I need to go back to work. You need to go back to the farm.'

'I don't want to go back.' Impulsive, stupid or not, that was an absolute.

But Max was made of sterner stuff than she. Some time during the night a decision had been made.

'Maggie, I said I won't rush you and I won't,' he said. 'Last night you had a baby. You're an emotional—'

'Mess? I am not,' she said, ready to be indignant, but he smiled and placed a finger on her lips.

'Of course you're not. But there's all sorts of things to be thought out before we decide where to take…what we're feeling for each other. You promised Betty you'd stay on the farm. Yes?'

'I…' Her face clouded. 'Yes.'

'Today's not the day to make a decision to break that promise,' he said gently. 'I love you and I want you but I will not pressure you. You go to hospital, then you go back to the farm and we'll take things from there. Maybe in three months…'

'Three months!' She was on a stretcher, settled into the ambulance and she said the 'three months' as a wail. If she hadn't been cradling her daughter she might have got up and told him where he could put his three months.

But Max's expression was firm. A decision had been made. 'Maggie, it's life-changing decisions we're talking here,' he told

her, and he kissed her lightly on the lips—and then, as if he couldn't help himself, he kissed her more deeply. 'I want no regrets when we move forward together,' he added.

'Will you still want me in three months?'

'I'll always want you,' he said simply, and he kissed her again, so deeply this time that the paramedics sighed and looked at their watches. He pulled away at last, smiled ruefully and climbed out of the van. 'Off you go, then, you and Rose. I'll clean up here and bring a suitcase to you later. And then…I'm working in the same hospital, my love. I won't be far away. Three months, my Maggie. We'll live that long.'

'Only if I have you waiting for me at the end,' she muttered, but she knew in her heart that what he was saying was sensible. She even managed to smile back. 'Oh, Max, I love you so much.'

Three months… Why had he said it? But even as he questioned himself he knew he was right. Maybe the time frame could be shorter but he doubted it. There were so many things that needed thinking through.

At least he hadn't been stupid enough to say he'd stay away from her. Yes, she needed space to think. Yes, her need of him might be hormonal. Yes, it was fair to give her time to recover from the emotions of the birth and, yes, he needed time to work out an idea that was still only a vague possibility—but staying away from her was impossible.

So Maggie was admitted to South Sydney, and if he happened to pass her ward a dozen times a day it wouldn't be proper not to check on her. Rose decided to be jaundiced, and there was another reason for him to be there. Yes, Maggie was a doctor, but she couldn't be dispassionate about her own daughter. It was hard enough for Max to be dispassionate, watching this tiny creature wearing her sunglasses under the lights. This tiny girl who held his heart in her hands almost as tightly as her mother did.

Their hospital stay was thus extended, but finally the jaundice resolved, and when Rose's colour faded from golden back to pink it was Max who drove them both back to the farm.

And if he hugged Maggie as he helped her into the car, if he kissed her as he closed the car door, and if he drove down the

coast road feeling all the smugness of a man with a new family, who could blame him?

Beside him Maggie smiled and smiled. She was happy to be going home, he thought, and there was another stab of disquiet. Home to the farm. How to make this work?

Angus was watching for their arrival from the back of an ancient Lanz Bulldog. Angus was a part of Maggie's family. There were complications everywhere. How could he ask her to abandon Angus?

He couldn't. He wouldn't.

Maggie had attempted to raise the issue with him but he'd shushed her. 'It's not time,' he'd said, and he wouldn't be budged.

His wonderful idea was growing. There were still so many factors, though. Somehow Max had to figure a way around them.

Was three months long enough? It had to be. He had to figure out a way.

Focus on now, he told himself harshly. One step at a time. Angus was watching them and Maggie was smiling at him. Angus wasn't smiling back. He was holding onto his tractor as if it was his refuge.

'She needs headlights,' Max called as they pulled up beside Angus's tractor. 'I might know a source where I can find some.'

'Yeah?' Angus said.

'Leave it to me,' Max said, and then, offhand, 'You want to meet your niece?'

The elderly farmer stared at both of them in apprehension but Maggie didn't move, didn't speak, and Max didn't either.

Slowly Angus ventured down from the tractor. Max flicked the switch of the sunroof so it slid back, exposing Rose in her cocoon in the back seat, swathed in pink, gazing in astonishment up at the sky.

Angus edged nearer. Neither Maggie or Max said a word.

Nearer.

He put a hand on the car—and then cautiously, cautiously put a finger out to touch.

Rose's little hand was just there. He touched her fingers and they curved and held, and Angus stared down at her in incredulity.

No one spoke but Max felt a knot of emotion in his chest that

had lots to do with the expression on Maggie's face—but also something to do with Angus himself. With this farm. With the night of Betty and the calves in the haystack.

Family.

And the ideas that had been drifting since Rose's birth became more than ideas. An ambition?

No, a certainty. If he could pull it off.

He must.

And then there was a whoop from the house and Sophie and Paula were tearing along the driveway to meet them. Angus backed away, but only as far as his tractor.

'You've met her first, Angus, not fair,' Sophie yelled, and then Margaret and John were outside, too, and Maggie and Rose were enveloped.

Max could go now.

Only Maggie clung to him, and he had no intention of leaving until he must. In truth, all he wanted was to bundle Maggie and Rose back into his car and take them back to Sydney. To leave them here seemed wrong—but there were plans to make. If he could do it in three months… He must. He needed to get back to Sydney and get things moving right now.

But still he stayed and had dinner with them, knowing he'd been a fool for not accepting dinner the night of the funeral. One dinner missed was one too many. Then Maggie walked him out to the car and it was entirely logical that he take her into his arms and kiss her and kiss her and kiss her.

'I love you,' he whispered into her hair, for it seemed impossible not to say it.

'I love you right back,' she whispered. 'Max, three months is crazy.'

'It is,' he said ruefully. 'But I need to sort stuff out. Can you bear to be patient?'

'What do you need to sort out?'

'A happy ever after,' he said. 'If that's what you want.'

'How can you doubt it?'

'Then be patient,' he said, and kissed her again—but then as Rose's indignant wail sounded from inside the house he put her away from him.

'I need to go and so do you. Go feed your daughter.'

‘You’ll come back?’

‘Soon.’

‘That’s not soon enough,’ she said, distressed. ‘Max…’

‘Hush,’ he told her. ‘Hush, my love. Let’s take this one day at a time. Let’s figure out where we go from here.’

She went back into the house to feed her baby, feeling bleak. Empty. Lost. That he was returning to Sydney without her…

He was giving her room to make her decisions. He was being honourable.

She didn’t want honourable. She wanted Max.

And why had she made those promises to Betty?

The promises were closing in on her now. Back in Sydney she’d thought she could break them. It had seemed possible. But here, with echoes of Betty all around her, it seemed less so. For her to walk away from Angus, and the farm, and the community…

Oh, but to walk away from Max…

Inside the house Margaret met her, holding Rose out for her to take. When she saw Maggie’s face she hugged her.

‘Oh, my dear, he’ll be back.’

‘Will he?’

‘Of course he will,’ Margaret said stoutly.

But for how long? Maggie thought, but she didn’t say it.

Max seemed to have faith in their future. Maybe she should, too.

He stayed away for almost a week and that was long enough. Then he made a mercy dash back, to give Angus his headlights, and bonnet badges he’d found for his 1949 Newman WD2. That was a good moment. Angus almost smiled. Maggie did.

Then he found someone to take over part of his role in Sydney so he could work reasonable hours. His car soon seemed to know the route back to the farm all by itself, and the more he visited, the more sure he was of what he felt. His thoughts were finding a centre, a purpose, but three months might not be long enough to finalise his plan.

Would she agree? Once the emotion of the birth had faded would she still feel the same? He daren't ask, not yet, but he rang, twice a day, sometimes more, and the pleasure in her voice said she might, she must.

'Your grin's getting fixed,' Anton told him. 'It's stretching your face.'

'Yeah,' he said.

'Don't do it,' Anton said morosely. 'Three kids and it's the end of life as you know it.'

'Would you want your old life?'

'Hell, I can't remember my old life,' Anton said. 'It's in the bottom of my wardrobe with my blue suede shoes. Figuratively speaking, that is. I'm not quite that old. I just feel it.'

'But for all the whinging…'

'Yeah, I wouldn't give it back.' Anton said, smiling at his friend. 'And if you take that final step, neither will you.'

She loved him, she loved him, she loved him. She wanted him here. That he wasn't next to her, seeing Rose's first smile, waking in the night next to her, loving her, felt wrong.

The promise she'd made to Betty seemed more and more impossible. To stay here for ever when the man she loved was in Sydney… How could she?

But Max wasn't asking her to go to Sydney. His phone calls and visits were all about now, all about what Rose was doing, how the farm was going, what was happening with the ancient Sift TD4 diesel Max had found and had shipped to the farm.

'So who's the tractor fanatic?' Maggie teased.

'Just taking a polite interest,' he said innocently. And she laughed to think of him, her swish Sydney surgeon, now with a secret passion for tractors… Max. Her man.

He wouldn't keep coming unless he wanted her. And she knew that she'd go with him. Despite her promise.

But the promise still lay heavy on her heart. The problem was that she'd become part of this community. Betty was gone but her ghost lingered through the house, a gentle, approving presence Maggie felt as a blessing all around her.

Betty had manoeuvred this into a happy ending, for the farm, for the community and for Angus, and in a sense Maggie had her

happy ending as well. She had her precious daughter who was already gurgling her delight at her world. She was surrounded by people who loved her.

She and Rose had their own part of the house. The apartment Betty had built was large, sun-filled and lovely, but Sophie and Paula were constantly in and out, fascinated by Rose, bringing the house to life with their chatter and laughter. And John and Margaret were wonderful. They were looking to buy their own home but there was no rush. No rush at all.

This situation could extend indefinitely, Maggie thought. If not for Max.

Three months. He was gently patient, but she knew now that patience disguised steady purpose. He loved her, he wanted her and he was making her fall more and more deeply in love with him at every visit.

A couple of months after Rose's birth Maggie started doing two clinics a week—morning sessions, with no house calls. It took some of the load from John, and it felt good. She was back to serving the little community of Yandilagong that had been such an important part of William's past. The reason she was here.

The farm—the second reason she was here—was great as well. The tractors were like benign spirits, with Angus as their leader. His calves were half-grown now, and friendly. Maggie watched Angus and the calves, and Sophie and Paula with Bonnie, and she started to think maybe a pup of her own would be fun.

But if she was to move to Sydney… Max had a hospital apartment. A pup? No.

How could it matter? How could she put a pup above Max?

He loved her. There was no doubt about that, and every time she saw him she knew deeper in her heart that this was the man she wanted to share her life with.

So what was the problem?

She could sell the farm to John and Margaret. She knew that. They'd take care of Angus and she could visit constantly.

She'd done the best she could for Betty, for Angus, for the farm, for William's beloved community. It was only…only…

No. She loved Max and every time he phoned, every time he visited, she knew that her love was returned and more.

She was his woman. His gaze lingered on her, his kisses told

her he wanted her, that he was waiting only from some misguided sense of chivalry. The wait didn't mean he didn't want her—the warmth of his voice on the end of the phone confirmed it. He'd said three months and he was sticking to it, but after that… She belonged to him as he belonged to her.

So she knew how this must end. At the end of three months she knew he'd come to claim his own.

And she knew what her answer must be.

And three months to the day he came. He'd rung the night before. 'Tomorrow,' he'd said, in a tone she couldn't mistake. He'd hardly said anything about three months for…well, for three months, but here it was and of course he'd remembered.

'I'll be there at lunchtime,' he said. 'Wear something pretty.'

So here she was, at lunchtime, wandering the house feeling like…

Like she'd made her decision and it was the right one, even if it did involve a sense of loss.

Rose was asleep in her little pink crib in her bedroom overlooking paddocks that swept down to the sea. Maybe they could find a house by the sea in Sydney. Maybe her longing to be a country girl had been irrational.

She'd be with Max.

If he still wanted her.

He wanted her. For months the sizzle had been building. It was in his voice, in his laughter, even in his silence. She couldn't mistake his desire, for she felt exactly the same about him. He made her toes curl.

Speaking of toes…she looked down at her feet. She was wearing sky-blue, open-toed sandals and she'd painted her toenails crimson. She was wearing a blue and white gingham dress with a bow at the back and Sophie had tied her hair up in a blue ribbon.

He'd ordered pretty. She felt a bit like Sandy from *Grease*, before the leather.

He was late.

‘What time are we expecting him?’ Margaret called from the kitchen. ‘My roast’ll spoil.’ She wandered out to join Maggie on the veranda and then turned toward the road. ‘Is this him now?’

Maggie gazed out, sizzle building like petrol on wildfire—and then her sizzle faded. This wasn’t Max. It was an SUV, bright crimson, with two surfboards on the roof rack.

‘Wrong place?’ Margaret said.

‘So what’s behind it?’ John asked, joining them. The SUV was slowing and turning into the driveway, and a truck was following. A huge truck, big enough to hold the contents of a small house.

‘Maybe Angus has ordered another tractor,’ John said, looking out to where Angus and Bonnie were sitting on the Sift TD4 diesel that Max had found. The Sift had been built in 1950 in France. Maggie knew that now. She was starting to feel almost as affectionate toward the tractors as Angus.

She’d be able to come home to visit.

Back, she reminded herself sharply. Not home. Home would be in Sydney with Max.

Max or not, the truck and the SUV were certainly coming in. The SUV drove slowly along between the tractors, followed by the truck. Who was in them?

The sun was in her eyes, but as the SUV passed Angus, the window slid downward. ‘Hey, Angus. Hey, Bonnie.’

It was definitely Max. But what was with the truck? Had Max brought Angus another tractor? A going-away present?

She hadn’t told Angus she was going away. She hadn’t told John or Margaret, but maybe they’d guessed.

She didn’t know herself yet, she reminded herself sharply, but that was stupid.

There was no choice.

Max.

But why was he driving an SUV? With surfboards?

Both truck and SUV were pulling up now, under the gums by the house. A couple of burly guys climbed out of the truck and stood, waiting. Max climbed out of the SUV. He was wearing jeans and boots and an open-necked checked shirt with his sleeves rolled up. His hair looked sort of unruly.

He looked great, she thought. He looked…free.

He reached back into the SUV and lifted out a black and white ball of fluff. Set it gently on its feet.

A puppy. A Border collie, like Bonnie. Ten or twelve weeks old? Cute as a button.

The puppy looked around in astonishment, and Bonnie was off Angus's tractor in a flash, bounding down to check out the new arrival.

The puppy rolled onto its back while Bonnie sniffed from all angles, paying special attention to the rear.

No one moved. It was like a very special test was being conducted. But then Bonnie's tail wagged, the puppy righted itself, put a paw up and gently swiped at Bonnie's nose.

Bonnie bumped him gently with her nose in return, wagged her tail, then turned and bounded back toward Angus. Puppy in tow.

'Hey, he's for Maggie,' Max called, and Angus even grinned.

'Share,' he said.

Not if I'm going to Sydney, Maggie thought wildly, but still she couldn't say anything.

But he wasn't walking toward her. Max was unroping the surfboards from the roof of his car. He lifted them down with loving care, and laid them on the ground.

Behind him the men had tugged open the van doors. They were carrying out…a sea kayak?

Aren't you going to help?' Max demanded of the group on the veranda. 'I'm paying these guys by the hour.' And John gave Maggie a push that nearly sent her off the veranda without benefit of steps.

'Go help your man,' he said.

'He's not—'

'Maggie,' Max called, sounding exasperated. 'I've brought you a surf board all the way from Sydney, and you don't even want to come see it? Oh, and the front berth in this kayak is for you.'

'But—'

'And there's more stuff,' he called. 'It might be a bit of a squash but it seemed too much bother to rent storage in Sydney. We can sort out what we don't want later.'

'But…' said Maggie.

'I think you'd better go see, dear,' Margaret said, smiling and smiling. 'I might go in and turn the roast down. John, girls,

inside, all of you.'

Don't leave me. She didn't say it. She thought it. She was feeling like the veranda was swaying under her.

'Come and look,' Max called, peremptorily this time, and finally she did, walking cautiously down from the veranda and out through the garden. The puppy came bounding to greet her, and that gave her a moment to get her thoughts together. Or as much as she could, kneeling to hug a squirming mass of black and white pup.

How had he known she wanted a puppy?

'We'll never keep him happy in Sydney,' she said, and then heard what she'd said and blushed from the toes up. She was making all sorts of assumptions—or she'd made assumptions and now they were being stood on their heads.

In a good way?

'I always wanted a dog,' Max said, and she rose and watched while the pup wheeled back to Bonnie. 'Her name's Bounce.'

'So he's not a gift,' she said cautiously.

'He's a gift.'

'But you said *you* want a dog.'

'He's a gift to all of us.'

'I don't understand.'

'Maggie, this is a moving van,' he said, motioning behind him as if she might not have noticed the van, the two burly removalists, the sea kayak, the vast, leather-topped desk they were now carting out. 'It's full of my stuff. Last time I was here I checked out a couple of empty sheds out the back. I was hoping I might be able to unload it here.'

'Why…why would you want to do that?'

'Ah.' He crossed the distance between them in a heartbeat, but stopped six feet away, as if reminding himself not to rush. 'I was hoping you'd guess,' he said. He motioned back to the surfboards. 'I'm also hoping you might teach me to surf.'

'You know how to surf,' she said, struggling to breathe.

'I can body-surf. I can't stand up. I didn't have William to teach me.'

'So you brought all your furniture—so I could teach you to surf?'

'Not all of it, but I did bring my grandfather's desk. Isn't it great? It's big enough for both of us. We can teach Rose to read

at this desk. Then there's my great-grandmother's piano. I have this really strong feeling that Rose will be a piano player. It can't go in the shed, by the way. It'll need to have a bit of the sitting room. Do you think it can have a bit of your sitting room?'

'I'm living in a one-bedroom apartment at the back of the house,' she said, with an attempt to get things clear.

'Yes, well, there's moves afoot to change that,' he said, smiling so much her heart felt like it was turning somersaults. 'I hope I haven't pre-empted things.'

'Pre-empted…'

'You see, John thinks this place could be a really wonderful medical centre.'

'Here?'

'Yandilagong,' he said patiently. 'The town itself is small, but the surrounding farming population is enormous. The farmers all end up going to the city for their major medical needs, but if there was a really good medical centre they wouldn't need to. John and I have been talking to the politicians and there's nothing but enthusiasm.'

'John and you?'

'John and I.'

Her head was spinning. 'So what's this got to do with pianos?'

'You're not giving me time,' he complained, but still he smiled, his lovely, slow, lazy smile, and her heart was giving up somersaulting and going into freefall. 'Do you know how beautiful you are?'

'No, I…'

'Someone ought to tell you,' he said. 'Only that someone needs time. Like a lifetime.'

'Max…'

'You're right, I'm getting ahead of myself,' he said. They were still standing about six feet apart. Stupidly formal. His eyes weren't leaving her face.

'John thinks a big medical centre would work here,' he said. 'He's a family doctor. So are you. Margaret's a dentist. That's two and a half medicos already, if we count you not going back to work full time.'

'I need to go back to work full time.'

'But do you want to, with Rose so young? If there were

supports in place so you didn't need to?'

'Max…'

'Maggie, don't distract me,' he said. 'Or don't distract me more than you're already doing. Blue hair ribbons, hey?'

'You said you wanted pretty. I let Sophie and Paula choose.'

'Sophie and Paula have fine taste,' he said, and grinned and then schooled his features into mock gravity. 'Enough. Let me get it all out in one hit so I can figure whether I should unload this van or just hightail it out of here.'

She was trying to figure out whether he was laughing or he was serious. She wanted to be closer to him, but still he stood back, watching her, as if he had to lay it all on the line before any movement was possible.

'We need more doctors,' he said.

'More doctors.'

'For our hospital,' he explained, as if she was a little bit thick. 'You know the old hospital out on the headland? It's used now as a holiday camp, but apparently it's still government owned. There's such medical need in this area it's becoming a political hot potato, and I have assurances that if we can guarantee staffing, they'll reopen it. So John's written to a friend of his who's also emigrating from Zimbabwe. She's a surgeon, her husband's a farmer and her sons dream of surfing. They think this place sounds great. And then there's Anton, my anaesthetist. His wife's going nuts, him leaving home at six in the morning and not getting home until well after the babies are in bed. This place is just what he needs as well.'

'You've done… John's done…'

'Nothing you can't undo,' he said, smiling, and smiling was all he had to do to have her so deeply in love she could never climb out. 'All you need to do is say the word,' he said. 'John and I didn't want to say anything to you until we knew it was possible, but we're almost sure now. So sure I've quit.'

'You've quit.'

'You sound like a parrot,' he said, and his smile widened. 'My beautiful parrot. Yes, I've quit.'

'Wh-why?'

'Because I want to be a baby doctor again,' he said, simply and surely. 'Maggie, I want to deliver babies. There's a huge

population of young families locally, and if Anton and I are here then the mothers won't need to go to Sydney for their confinements. So that's what I want. It's what I want almost as much as the thing I want most in the world. The really big thing. The thing on which everything else depends.'

'I don't… I don't…'

'You don't know what that is?' He paused, a long drawn-out silence where the world stretched out before them, infinite in its possibilities.

'I told you the night Rose was born,' he said softly. 'I'm saying it again now. Maggie, we've both been battered,' he said softly. 'But we both know what love is and how wonderful it is that we've found it again. It's time now we acknowledged it, took it in both hands and never let it go. The night Rose was born I knew that you had my whole life in your hands. I love you, Maggie, with all my heart. For now. For ever.'

His words took her breath away. It was like there were suddenly a thousand gifts, showering down like the Christmas morning of a child's dreams, only better and better and better.

'I also want to live here,' he said, and it was like a tiny prosaic jolt that had her thinking, no, this wasn't dreaming. This might even be true.

Why didn't he move? Why didn't he take her in his arms? Was this a dream? She couldn't quite believe it could be real.

'John's found another farm,' Max said, and there was that in his eyes that said he understood exactly what she was feeling. Maybe he was feeling like that, too. 'He's put in a provisional offer.'

'Provisional…'

'Provisional on you marrying me.'

She loved this man.

Marriage.

'So…so let me get this right,' she stammered. 'You want to leave Sydney and come here. For…always?'

'I never wanted to live in Sydney anyway,' he said, and his smile was a caress all by itself. 'When Alice died I walked away from my career and I didn't much care what direction I was heading. There's a few of us like that at Sydney South. John, escaping from the troubles in Zimbabwe. Anton, who came from

France after a broken love affair and never left. And then there's John's friend, the surgeon. There's a whole queue, waiting for you to say the word.'

'The word?'

'Yes,' he said softly. 'Just say yes.'

There was too much to take in.

She'd spent three months trying to work out how to break a promise, yet here was the man she loved with all her heart telling her she needn't break it. That the dream that had started with William was still precious, but he was willing—no, he was demanding—that she share it.

It was too big. It was making her head explode.

'You'd seriously come here to live?' she whispered, awed.

'And work. It's what I should be doing, Maggie,' he said, his smile fading. 'I should be taking care of mothers having babies. That's what I'm trained for. And I should be taking care of you.'

'I don't need—'

'To be taken care of? I think you do. But, Maggie, if I can take care of you I promise to let you take care of me right back.' He said it quickly, as if he seriously thought she was going to argue. 'I want you to yell at me if you think I'm spending too much time working and not enough time with you. I'd even like you to yell at me if I squeeze the toothpaste the wrong way. I might yell back but if that's what you want…a spot of yelling…I don't see me objecting. I want you to teach me to surf, and I want us both to teach Rose. I want to help Angus with his tractors. I want to help train Bounce. I want us to have more babies.'

'You want…'

'Most of all I want what you want, Maggie,' he told her. 'I want a happy beginning. A family. Love and laughter from this day forth. So what do you say, Maggie? Will you marry me?'

'You're too far away,' she whispered, and he was with her before she finished saying it. Taking her in his arms. He smiled down at her, loving her with his smile, and then suddenly he was kneeling before her.

And suddenly Margaret, with Rose in her arms, and John and Sophie and Paula were out on the veranda again. Not making a sound. Bearing witness.

Suddenly the removalists had put the desk down to watch.

And suddenly Angus was standing up on the tractor, holding a dog firmly under each arm, as if he was afraid they might interrupt.

Nothing interrupted.

'Marry me,' Max said again, and he took her hand in his and held it to his lips.

This was crazy. Mad.

It was muddy. He was kneeling in the mud, asking her if she'd marry him.

She had an audience hanging on her response.

Joy began to well up inside her—clearly, this could be no dream.

She knelt down, too.

'Your dress,' he said, in mock horror.

'Blue and brown's great,' she said, and her eyes were inches from his. She had both his hands in hers. She had him right where she wanted him.

'Ask me again,' she said.

'I think I've forgotten. What was the question?'

'Something about marriage.'

'Right, that,' he said, sounding dazed. And then he swore. 'I knew I forgot something. Hang on a minute.' And he reached round to his back pocket and found a box. A tiny crimson box.

He flicked it open.

It wasn't a ring. It was a single diamond, perfect, sparkling in the sunlight. Making her catch her breath with wonder.

'I didn't know how you'd like it set,' he said. 'So I thought… There's so much you've done because you had no choice. I thought if you said yes…'

'If I said yes…

'If you said yes,' he went on resolutely, 'we can get it set any way you want. We can surround it with rubies. We can embed it in gold or mount it on platinum. You can have a woven plait band or a smooth one. Anything you like, my love. As long as you take me.'

'A package deal, huh?'

'A package indeed,' he said, and cast an amused look around at their audience. 'A family. A medical centre. A medical partnership. Love. All or nothing, my beautiful Maggie. So I'm

asking you again, and I'm thinking surely this time you need to answer. Maggie Croft, love of my heart, please will you marry me?'

And what was a girl to say to that?

She put her hands on his face. She drew a deep breath and she smiled into his loving eyes.

And she cast her future to the wind, to blow where it willed, with this man beside her.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'Yes, I will. My love. My heart. My life.'

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